



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES



3 3433 07605227 7

Y·PEGGY

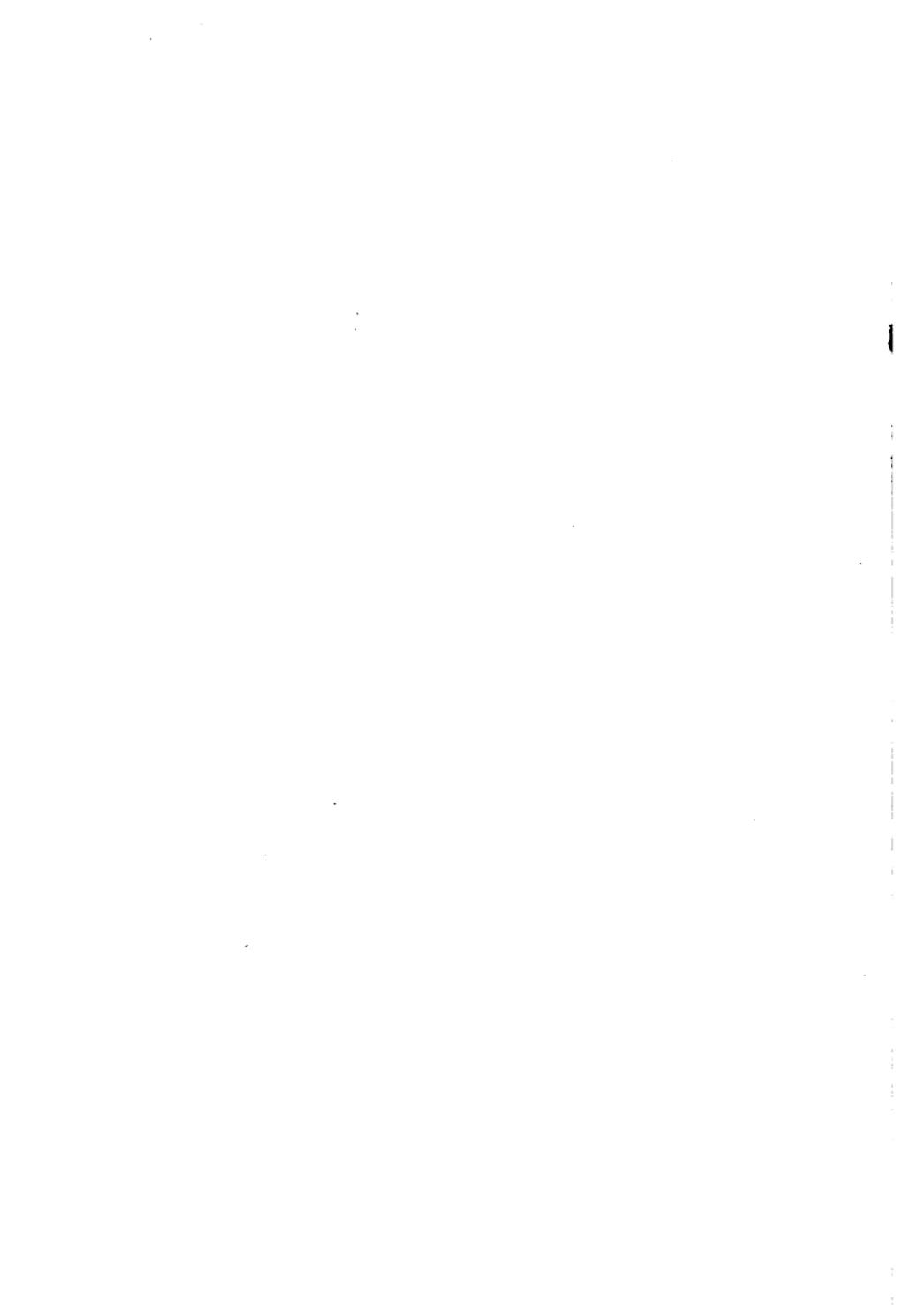
LEAVES·TOWN

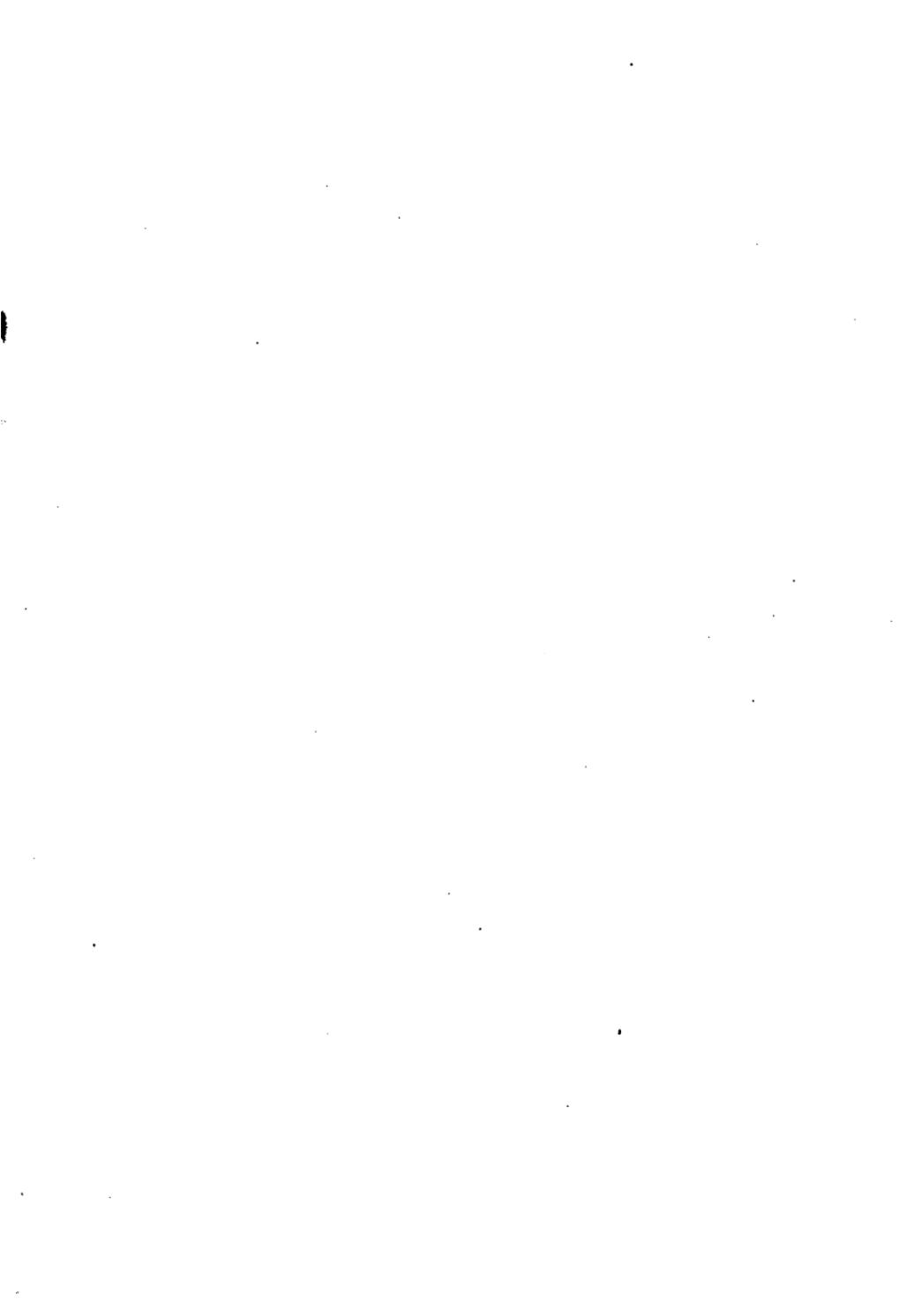
FRANCES·AYMAR·MATHEWS

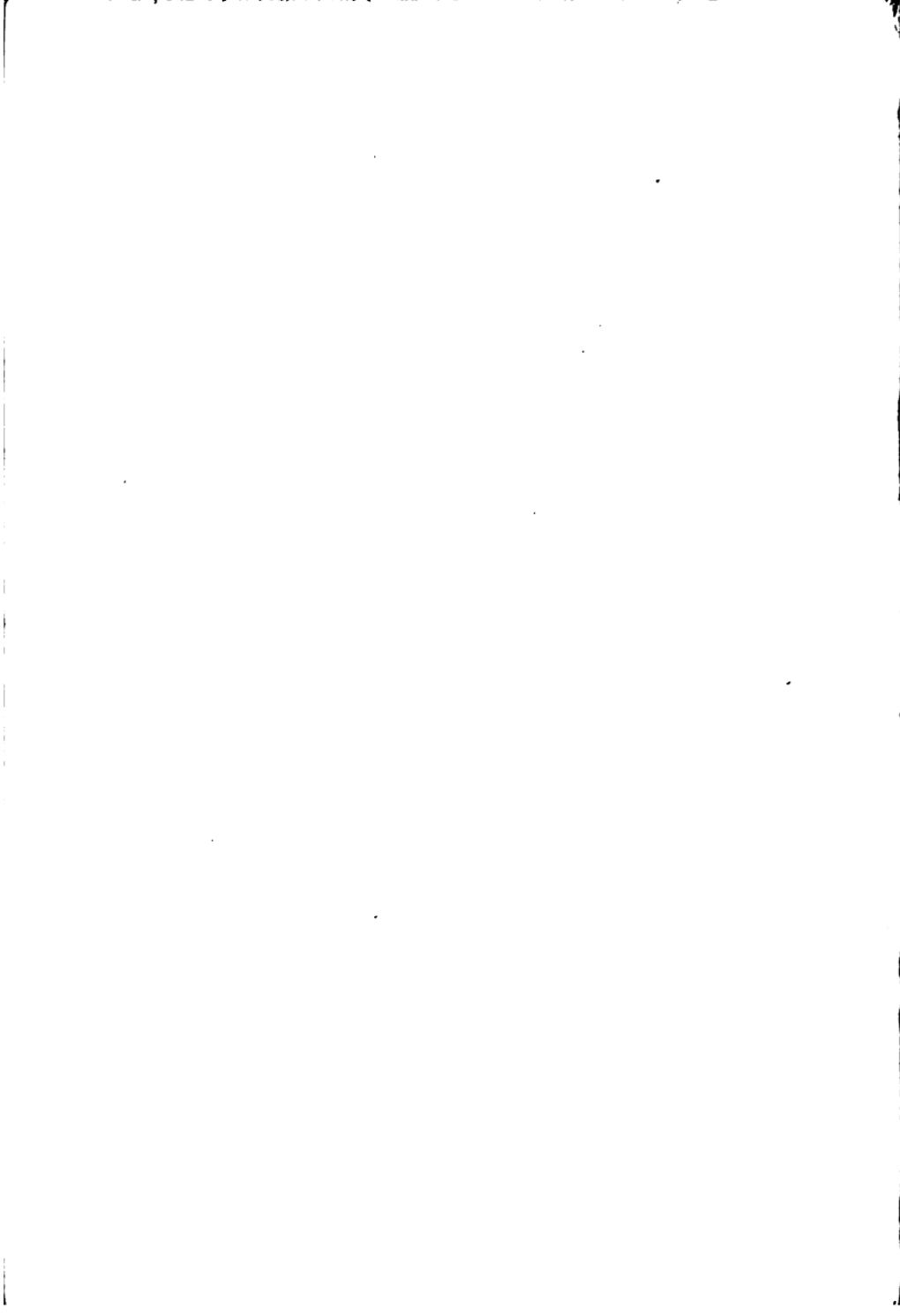




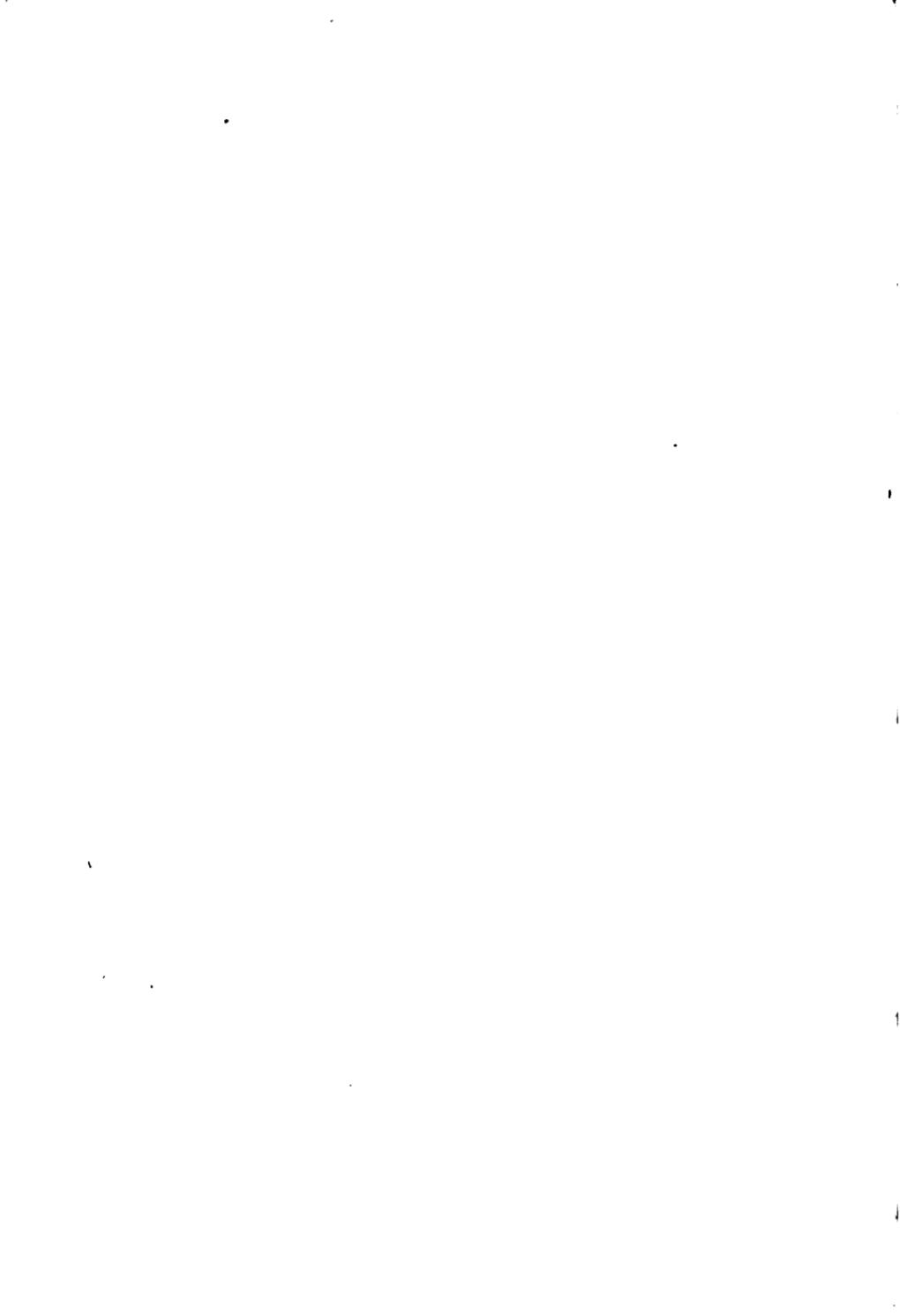
NBO
Mathe







MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN



PROPERTY
OF THE
NEW YORK
SOCIETY LIBRARY

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

MRS. LENOX AND
MRS. FOUNDATIONS



MY LADY PEGGY

MY
LADY PEGGY
LEAVES
TOWN

BY
FRANCES AYMAR MATHEWS

FRONTISPICE

NEW YORK
MOFFAT, YARD AND COMPANY
1913

60



MY
LADY PEGGY
LEAVES
TOWN

BY
FRANCES AYMAR MATHEWS

FRONTISPICE

NEW YORK
MOFFAT, YARD AND COMPANY

1918

40

114106B

**COPYRIGHT, 1913, BY
MOFFAT, YARD AND COMPANY
NEW YORK**

MAK 2 2 1919

F

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

- In which my Lady Peggy leaves town, assumes a name
which does not belong to her, and arouses the right-
eous wrath of her chaperone* I

CHAPTER II

- In which my Lady Peggy postpones a proposal* 12

CHAPTER III

- In which my Lady Peggy sticks to her colors, and
finds herself in the middle of a frightful dilemma* 29

CHAPTER IV

- In which my Lady Peggy learns that her choice is a
spy* 41

CHAPTER V

- In which my Lady Peggy asks her lover for the other
man's life and gets it* 52

CHAPTER VI

- In which her ladyship's lover signs away his life for
her sake; and hears her calling him from afar* 61

302117

CONTENTS

CHAPTER VII

<i>In which Lady Peggy leaves another town, at midnight, this time, and with the other man; and calls the Captain to her</i>	<small>PAGE</small>
	73

CHAPTER VIII

<i>In which Lady Peggy finds herself confronted with two simultaneous proposals; two pistols: and a marriage ceremony</i>	84
---	----

CHAPTER IX

<i>In which her ladyship sends away the Captain, and the spy, with a gun; and finds herself alone in a dismal shack</i>	96
---	----

CHAPTER X

<i>In which her ladyship springs as bravely into trousers as did the first Lady Peggy into breeches, just in time to hear the "hello" of arriving men . . .</i>	105
---	-----

CHAPTER XI

<i>In which my Lady Peggy as a Barkeep makes the acquaintance of the Tucson Terror and is annexed by that gentleman</i>	115
---	-----

CHAPTER XII

<i>In which Mr. Billy Birdsong assures Lady Peggy of his protection, and wherein Lady Peggy sees a face at the pane</i>	129
---	-----

CONTENTS

ix

CHAPTER XIII

- | | PAGE |
|--|------|
| <i>In which my Lady Peggy is ordered by the Captain
"to pour for the crowd," and forthwith flings the
mugs across the counter and declines to obey . . .</i> | 132 |

CHAPTER XIV

- | | |
|--|-----|
| <i>In which her ladyship and her lover encounter each
other, in the dark at the threshold of the upper
room, at Walsh's hotel, while the Tucson Terror
waits with his pals below</i> | 145 |
|--|-----|

CHAPTER XV

- | | |
|--|-----|
| <i>In which my Lady Peggy saves her lover's life with
her lover's pistol, and is called a "halt on your
life" by Mr. Bandy Bergh of New York . . .</i> | 159 |
|--|-----|

CHAPTER XVI

- | | |
|--|-----|
| <i>In which Lieutenant Thorsby essays to take posses-
sion, and wherein the three guardsmen think they
have found out where Lady Peggy went when she
left town</i> | 166 |
|--|-----|

CHAPTER XVII

- | | |
|---|-----|
| <i>In which the three guardsmen express a wish to meet
Mr. Billy Birdsong face-to-face; and in which also
the Colonel receives the Captain's letter . . .</i> | 178 |
|---|-----|

CHAPTER XVIII

- | | |
|--|-----|
| <i>In which the Colonel orders that Captain Churchill,
spy, shall be hunted, taken, court-martialed and
shot</i> | 187 |
|--|-----|

CONTENTS

CHAPTER XIX

	PAGE
<i>In which the Captain finds the laced and beribboned garments of her ladyship in the ice-box of Walsh's shack</i>	195

CHAPTER XX

<i>In which the three guardsmen meet her ladyship on the road and tell her they know who she is . . .</i>	205
---	-----

CHAPTER XXI

<i>In which the supposed Tucson Terror is brought to bay and informed that his hour has at last come .</i>	216
--	-----

CHAPTER XXII

<i>In which the guardsmen obtain Lady Peggy's jewels, and with this clue decline to part company from Mr. Birdsong; until they shall learn from him the whereabouts of Lady Peggy herself</i>	225
---	-----

CHAPTER XXIII

<i>In which the guardsmen take her ladyship a voyage in the air; during which she first learns of the Captain's letter to the Colonel: during which she strikes one flag and is landed in the Fort</i>	238
--	-----

CHAPTER XXIV

<i>In which Bandy remarks that he has won his bet: and her ladyship quits the Fort on the Colonel's own mount; and the guardsmen leave for the place where Lady Peggy is said to be</i>	253
---	-----

CONTENTS

xi

CHAPTER XXV

	PAGE
<i>In which the three guardsmen entertain the spy; show him Peggy's jewels; and only learn the name of their guest as he speeds away from them</i>	256

CHAPTER XXVI

<i>In which Judy asks, "Who is Lady Peggy de Bohun?" and is not told</i>	271
--	-----

CHAPTER XXVII

<i>In which the Captain and the Colonel meet for five minutes only</i>	285
--	-----

CHAPTER XXVIII

<i>In which the guardsmen think they locate Lady Peggy: and also think they see her shadow in the hotel Xochitl. In which they also behold Mr. Birdsong once more</i>	288
---	-----

CHAPTER XXIX

<i>In which the Captain takes off his cap to her ladyship's shadow too, and at last gets a glimpse of the tall, slim Barkeep</i>	300
--	-----

CHAPTER XXX

<i>In which on the eve of a triplicate duel a shriek is heard from the upper room in which her ladyship is believed to be hidden</i>	308
--	-----

CHAPTER XXXI

<i>"It was a mouse"</i>	315
-----------------------------------	-----

CONTENTS

CHAPTER XXXII

- In which the Captain again knocks at a door, believing her ladyship will open, while the three guardsmen wait at the same door as well* 324

PAGE

CHAPTER XXXIII

- In which the guardsmen and the Captain salute the lady of the shadows; in which Bandy strikes his colors, and the guardsmen set flight for New York* 334

CHAPTER XXXIV

- In which, almost under the shadow of Bandy's bi-plane Kent Gratiot and Jack Churchill meet face to face once more* 341

CHAPTER XXXV

- In which the kiss her lover gave her ladyship, her ladyship never forgot* 348

CHAPTER XXXVI

- In which the guardsmen pledge, "Here's to her ladyship"—and, "Here's to him"* 362

MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

CHAPTER I

In which my Lady Peggy leaves town, assumes a name which does not belong to her, and arouses the righteous wrath of her chaperone

"LADY PEGGY has left town," Hammond exclaimed in amazed sorrow.

"Left town?" His tone was staggered, and his air one of consternation as Bandy Bergh responded.

"Don't know, old man; she's gone," Sterling said then. The news traveled up and down the avenue, in and out the houses and hotels, and tea rooms and restaurants where her ladyship had used to frequent; the club rooms where her victims — there were scores of them — were wont to smoke and highball themselves into a temporary forgetfulness of her charms and her willfulness; even in banking houses and in bank lobbies, on 'Change; at the aero meet; at the polo grounds; the bewildering intelligence went from mouth to mouth, and no soul of them could say where she had gone.

2 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

The apartment at the Plaza, where her ladyship lived with her maiden aunt, Miss Pamela Burgoine, was closed; the proprietors knew nothing, not even by what train or boat she had whisked herself away, nor when she would return, nor if she went accompanied by other than her chaperone.

Certain it was her ladyship had left town without leaving a scrap of a hint as to her destination behind her!

Men were distracted, several of them; some sought further distraction in games of chance, some in decanters; some in the society of ladies who were also fair; while three of them quitted town, too, in search of oblivion, and likewise in search of my Lady Peggy herself.

It was so unlike her ladyship to steal off like this; whenever she had left town before it had been to the pleasing accompaniment of many autos, baskets of fruit, bunches of flowers, boxes of books, galaxies of moody gentlemen at the pier or the station, but this departure without precedent rankled in their minds and caused a half-dozen of speedy engagements of that order "on the rebound."

Peggy not only of a surety had left town, but in town she had left various suitors sitting on the keen edge of that estate called "taken into consideration"; to not one of these, even a line, telephone, word, or picture-card: and do what they

all might, her ladyship's whereabouts was not discovered; she had gone and that was all there was to it, so far as the victims were concerned. To them the great white way looked black; to them fascinating Fifth Avenue, with its side-show streets and bewitching tea and trinket shops, its parade, glow, and movement, seemed but a desert, just because Peggy in her self-guided car, or Peggy a-foot, velvet shod, Peggy on top of her horse, or Peggy driving her Mexican tandem, was missing.

What was the use of private theatricals and my Lady Peggy de Bohun not in them? Since her ladyship was of all ladies the most versatile in the dramatic art. Could she not dance a thousand "steps" of her twinkling little feet to the minute? Could she not take off any sort of dialect under the sun? Could she not, with exquisite impudence, travesty any manner of man to his face? Could she not smoke a cigarette, though such was not her custom or inclination, with the rarely finished air of a connoisseur in the weed?

What was the use of bazaars, charity matinées, funds for folds for babies, cats, or dogs, since her mirthful ladyship had fled the town?

What was the sense of dining hither, yon, or anywhere else, since no more could Lady Peggy be watched floating in, in her own inimitable fashion, chaperone well provided with an escort in the wake, a brace of gallants most likely at her lady-

4 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

ship's either side? What joy to see her drop her wrap and show them her faultless gown, worn as no other girl could wear one; draw off her gloves and let them feast upon her handsome hands, barbaric, to be sure; freighted down with the flashing jewels she loved above all the rest of her belongings! What pleasure to watch her eat and drink; to hear her laugh, so low, so full of witchery and music, so full of "follow me — all — if you can"!

And she had left them without a sign.

There were those, a trio of them, who swore deep, sitting, the night after her ladyship's flight, at the club over their tall glasses, to follow, seek, and find her. They were chaps with little else to do in this world but amuse themselves with autos, races, yachts, and air-cars. They swore deep they all loved Peggy; no one of them really believed he'd ever win her, but no one of them was at all minded to give up the chase. To them it was not alone the pursuit of the girl they adored, but it was likewise sport, adventure. Uncommon adventure at that, a species of detective work inuring in it, an element of mystery, and all the delights of embarking for an unknown port. There was chivalry and there was romance.

Sterling, who had initiated the search, was an auto enthusiast; they were to start in his car, the Pope tourer, in which she had sat with him on more than one occasion.

Hammond, the oldest of the three, pinned his money fast on his horses. Behind the four he intended to ship for use in the expedition her willful ladyship had, oftener than he could count, held reins.

Bergh, "Band-box Bergh," as the other boys called him, had already risked and lost several respectable fortunes in aëro cars; his latest, a palace of the clouds as he called the machine, had stood the strain across seas from Paris to Madrid; won a prize, been fetched over, rehauled, and, ready for action, was to be taken along with them. In it, had not her ladyship condescended to mount the skies with him at Rouen last year? To be sure, the car had turtled nimbly over, but her ladyship, unhurt, had but laughed at its owner's woeful disarrangement of toilette.

The trio had no idea of tarrying in their start. Telephones were put into commission from one end of town to the other. Lying excuses about business, mines, strikes, dying relatives, etc., etc., were also put into active use toward sisters, brothers, parents, and friends. The aëro car crew, the grooms, the chauffeur were hastily notified to be ready at a moment's warning to start on an extended tour.

Where?

That was the question which somewhat puzzled these argonauts themselves; but when a man's heart is at the helm, and his hand on the throttle,

6 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

and his purse full, and youth in his veins, and girl
for the goal a way will always be found.

They found it.

Her ladyship left town of a Wednesday. By the Wednesday two weeks following, Hammond, Sterling, and Bergh, with all their several suites and paraphernalias, had left town too.

Westward ho! Yes, they tossed up for the goal and the Sunset Side won out.

But where was she?

Two thousand and more miles away by this, sitting in Punty's hotel at Fort McHenry on the border; that's where Lady Peggy was.

Why was she there?

"Aunt Pam," her ladyship herself answered this self-same query propounded by her chaperone, who sat forlornly enough, rocking in the parlor of the shack hotel, the most of the main floor of which had been preëmpted by her niece, now some three weeks since. "Aunt Pam, I came here because I adore unusual things. This little bald station suits me." Miss Burgoyne groaned. "I came to get away from titles, gauds, hypocrites, sky-scrapers, hotels, palaces, ermine furs, chiffons, and love-sick men who were all dying more or less," her ladyship made a long pause, "for my money, and me thrown in."

"This might all have been done without the ridiculous assumption of marriage on your part, without acting and telling lies and compelling me

MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN 7

to do the same." Miss Burgoyne was very near to tears.

"It might," Peggy replied assentingly, "but that wouldn't have been Lady Peggy de Bohun. To be a young widow I have always considered the acme of position. I am sure had my ancestress, the first Lady Peggy, been born now and here, instead of in England in seventeen hundred and something, she would do as I have done if she had wanted to."

"It is sinful." There were actual tears in Miss Pamela's eyes.

"No; it's delicious! When I signed myself as Mrs. Margaret Gratiot on the greasy book Mr. Punty calls his 'registry' I felt a thrill of rapture. Tumbling out of the aëroplane that time at Rouen with Bandy Bergh was nothing to this sensation, and as to being pinned under a motor car, it's not in it with that signature." Peggy laughed and skipped across the room.

"Deceitful, full of risk, danger; heaven knows what extraordinary things may come of such masquerading." Miss Burgoyne's sobs were pitiful.

"I hope so!" Her ladyship's tone, notwithstanding the sobs of her aunt, was blithe. "Now listen, Auntie; seven years ago Kent Gratiot made love to me in Egypt; sitting on top of the great pyramid came the proposal. I said no, of course. Kent persisted for months, sent me his portrait large as life and lots of pretty presents; then Kent

8 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

got killed in a railway accident in the Philippines; he hadn't a relative on earth, and so, as no one could care, I just borrowed his name for myself and fetched his picture along for local color." Her ladyship, with cheerful mien, now drew the cover from an easel in the corner, revealing the bust portrait of a well-favored, attractive man of perhaps thirty-five. "Kent would simply shriek with laughter if he were here. I know he would. There!" She replaced the velvet drapery and the vase of flowers. "Poor Mr. Punty thinks I am very constant not to have married again." Her ladyship glanced coyly at her aunt.

"How could you do it?" The tone was one of piercing reproach.

"Easily." Her ladyship's emphasis was all to the cause of mirth.

"But the man you might marry must be told of all this tomfoolery; must be informed that you have a large fortune, that you are not a widow, that—"

"Why must he be told?" Peg sat on the table and swung her little feet back and forth.

"Why!" Consternation but feebly describes Miss Pam's manner as she spoke. "After all my years of instruction and example, this is too much! How can you laugh! It is solemn."

"No." Her ladyship was by this down from the table and playing a tune on the window pane. "It's opera comique!" she added half to herself.

MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN 9

"But it is. Doubly so because you are beginning to care for Captain Churchill." The aunt regarded the niece with calmness and decision.

"Auntie!" Indignation was in Peg's rejoinder.

"Well, then, he is beginning to care for you," Miss Burgoyne spoke in a slightly mitigated fashion.

Lady Peggy shook her head. "I think he's in — the — middle of it, Aunt Pam; anyway there he is now, with Lieutenant Thorsby. I must rush and get out of my habit."

"Peggy, I thought you left town to get away from men," Miss Pam cried irately as she adjusted her glasses and moved her head in a despairing way.

"I did," cried her ladyship at the door. "To get away from those men, to the neighborhood of some new kind. I fancied a barracks would contain a different sort." She laughed deliciously, and with that rare accomplishment of laughing, both at and with herself. "It does! Auntie, you'd better get into a nice gown; that one looks horridly, and both the Captain and the Lieutenant will be here for supper. I asked Thorsby just for you!" Her ladyship, still laughing mischievously, ran up the stairs, Miss Burgoyne following just in time to escape the two men who entered accustomedly, and on seeing the room empty, void of the one presence they sought, seeming to

10 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

resume an interrupted theme of some moment.

"I reckon you'll have time to glance over them," the younger officer spoke, "before Mrs. Gratiot comes in. She always gives a chap a long wait," with a grimace.

Churchill unfolded the papers in his hand, scanned several sheets, and exclaimed, "Kent Gratiot!" His emphasis was keenly on the latter word. "Her name; I never thought of it before."

"Lots of Gratiots in the southwest; she isn't the only one."

Churchill stopped short in his glancing at the documents and stared at Thorsby as he exclaimed quietly, "Yes, she is."

"In that sense, of course, she is!" the Lieutenant agreed. "The most charming, enchanting, bewitching, little relict man ever left free to drive other men to perdition."

Jack Churchill regarded Charley Thorsby with a considerable and accelerated attention. "I say! Boy, you don't mean that you —?"

"Why not?" the curly-headed Lieutenant retorted.

"I hadn't seen it that way." Churchill's deep, interested eyes were fastened on his companion's face.

"I'm a fairly good-looking chap, the girls say," Thorsby said, "Churchill, and I know how,

MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN 11

Jack." Then the Lieutenant took an airy turn up and down the room.

"Seriously, Charley, does she?"

"Seriously, old man; she doesn't." The Captain took a quick breath as his junior proceeded. "Mrs. Gratiot certainly livens me up a lot, there's no denying that, but somehow, Jack, did you never feel things coming, casting shadows before them?"

"Yes," thoughtfully, "I have indeed, more than once."

"Well, I feel there's another girl coming my way soon who'll liven me up to the plunge-point, ring, book, parson *et al.*"

Captain Churchill did not even smile. "And I, lad, feel disaster creeping up to me." He spoke in genuine apprehension.

"Nonsense, Jack Churchill!" Amazement was patent in Thorsby's tone. "Mrs. Gratiot cares for you, I'm —"

CHAPTER II

In which my Lady Peggy postpones a proposal

THE Captain's hand was on his brother officer's arm and the look on his face put a full stop to Charley Thorsby's speech; he resumed this way: "Reckon the only disaster that's creeping along is for Kent Gratiot. We'll have him tonight."

Churchill nodded; he was deep in his documents again. "What luck his pony broke a leg and he had to borrow at Fort Garry, and left these in the dead pony's saddle pocket."

"What fool work to have put them there!" cried Thorsby. "I'll bet a gun, some girl was at the bottom of his thoughts and made him leave tracks."

"'Tracks,'" muttered Churchill; "he left the whole outfit." He had sat down. "Odd, how a pull of chance puts the man in my hands that I've been hunting for, for two years. You didn't know that Gratiot is the reason for my roving commission?" Thorsby shook his curly head.

"Yes, I even doubled up my own status and got a special permit from the War Department to

enrolle in the Secret Service so as to catch this fellow."

"No!" The younger man surveyed the older one with the generous warm admiration one man can have for another.

"Yes. I like the work. When it can't be the war game, give me a spy to bring to cover."

"You've done it."

"No, it was the pony," he smiled grimly. "I never could exactly pick the spy; his paths were so quickly scratched over, his leave and come so exquisitely adjusted."

"When did you first make it that it was this Kent Gratiot, Jack?" The Lieutenant sat down too: they were close to each other.

"From the word go. I was stationed with my own regiment at Fort Adams, when I saw him, gotten up in an artist's velvet blouse, cap, and paraphernalia, sketching the sea and rocks: a very fine looking fellow; there were girls around, of course, peering at his easel. A big blow came on suddenly, and, whack! went the handsome painter man's things flying all over the place. I helped pick them up. Two of the drawings were not pictures, they were plans."

"Jove!" Thorsby tipped back in his cane seat chair until it creaked.

"That was my starter after Kent Gratiot. I found out he'd just escaped being cashiered from the Service, back two years before that; I found

14 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

out that for twenty-four solid months he'd been making and obtaining plans for every fortification on both coasts and of all the harbor defenses north, south, east, west and selling them at an enormous price to little innocent brown Japan!" Churchill smiled to himself as he refolded some of his papers.

Thorsby shook his head. "What'll he get?"

"What's coming to him; court-martial, short shrift and shot before sunset of the same day."

"You've got standing orders from Washington, then?"

Churchill inclined his head, as he put his papers in his pocket. "What's up?" for Charley had started to the other door.

"I heard a girl's skirts swishing and I thought I'd better get out."

Jack laughed. "See here; Gratiot'll be alone, he's never had a pal; he'll be armed of course. He is due along any old time now; I don't want Mrs. Gratiot to know there's anything like this going on right here in the shack with her. Will you go back to the barracks and fetch three or four men so's we can grab him outside the house? Don't tell the Colonel what for. I want to give him a surprise."

"O.K. I say, old man." Charley laughed comprehendingly. "I'd have gone without that

excuse. She's coming! I've an awfully good ear for skirts. You'll have to tell her everything before long. I've been engaged a few times, and they just won't stand for secrets. So long." The Lieutenant swung out one door as Lady Peggy entered by another.

"So soon again!" Surprise, beautifully feigned indeed, was in her tone.

"You said I might come over." He said it deprecatingly to be sure, and yet with that flavor of courage not at all inimical to success.

"Did I?" Again her ladyship's voice betokened a well-played astonishment.

Churchill smiled and his voice lowered a bit as he said, "I fetched you the songs; they came as I was mounting."

"Thank you." She put out her hands. "What a lot. Won't you light up for me?" tendering him a match by the lamp. The tiny appeal in her voice caused him a great joy, although he answered:

"No, I refuse; it's so much more delightful in the twilight." His eyes were lost in hers, his hands held hers and the music too.

"But the wind howls so," her ladyship urged. "A storm must be coming."

"Let it come. We are quite safe in here, together." There was the old, old magic of possession, and of sweet command in his bearing and voice.

16 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"Are we?" There was a kind of terror in hers; she dropped the music.

"Peggy, Peggy, my girl;" he dropped it too but kept her hands close. Then the blast blew the window open, wrenched the shutter from its hinge; it fell touching her ladyship's gown; he pushed it away: what to him were wind or rain, or anything but that she was near him. "Peggy, I —"

"Not to-night," her ladyship sprang away.
"Wait, wait, please wait."

"How long?"

"Until the hurricane's done, until the sun shines."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Because' what?" He waited patiently as one would wait at the gate of Paradise, knowing it would open soon.

"Just because—I say so!" Lady Peggy laughed.

"Nonsense! I want to tell you." Churchill was not going to be put off another second: at least so he informed himself, but as he was reckoning that time without Peggy, it was not surprising that he made a mistake.

For Peggy frowned in a most bewitching way and even pouted, as she picked up all of the songs from the floor, seated herself at the piano, and

began to play very vigorously indeed. "Look!" she exclaimed, nodding toward the sheet she had placed on the rack before her. "See how appropriate! the name of this song I just happened to pick up is 'Tell you !'" Her ladyship laughed in great glee, although to be sure, had the Captain been possessed of the feminine ear, he would have easily detected a nervous strain in her merriment.

Contrary to her expectations Churchill very meekly stood up beside the piano, and, having read the song over before he fetched it (Peggy had never seen it), he replied, "Yes, I'll sing it for you if you don't mind running over the accompaniment for me?"

Then her ladyship, such are the extremely contrary methods of her divine sex, almost pouted again, stopped playing the piano, and really thought the Captain quite too cool and obliging.

The Captain, however, notwithstanding the urgent matters on his mind of quite a different calibre from these, stood the ground her ladyship had allotted him to exercise in and repeated, "If you will be so good as to run it over, as you read at sight — just to please you," he added innocently enough.

So Peggy played and Churchill sang this:

18 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"TELL YOU"

"Tell you?" Ah, it's a secret,
I dare not tell you this;
'Tis deep as the sea out yonder,
And sweet as a first sweet kiss.

"Tell you?" But, it's a secret!
Couldn't you try to guess?
Something that makes me tremble,
Whenever I try to confess?

"Tell you?" Dear, it's a secret;
Old as the hills out there,
Fresh as the daisies' freshness,
Scenting the morning air.

"Tell you?" Yes, it's a secret,
Everyone's kept it too;
All the wide world has held it,
Ever since skies were blue.

"Tell you?" Is it a secret?
Don't you know it by heart?
It's only, Sweetheart, I love you, . . .

his hands were over hers again now, his head bent to the level of her own; but the compelling power of woman is stronger than the imperial will of man, and the whim of Eve is the sceptre that rules no matter what manner of Adam.

Lady Peggy rose from the piano-stool quite

quickly and walked across the room just as if the Captain had sung about bees and flowers; then, as he watched her, somewhat nonplussed for the moment, she said:

"Do you believe in presentiments, Captain Churchill?"

He remained at the piano as he replied.
"Yes."

"And omens, and thought-transferences, and all of those weird things?" Her ladyship was sitting on the arm of the big Morris chair, a perilously seductive figure too.

"I am afraid I do, to an extent. Why?"
Yet the Captain did not stir from the piano.

"It's 'because' again;" she laughed now.

"Do you know," he leaned against the instrument watching her. "I've had a presentiment for the last hour!"

"Have you? What is it?" she cried out eagerly.

"It's that some sort of evil's on the road to you, dear." The last word was uttered so softly, so tenderly; perhaps she did not hear? Oh, yes, she did!

But she merely solemnly nodded as she spoke:
"I dare say. My aunt feels sure of that always."

"She does?" he came across to her in alarm.
"Is there any reason for her belief?"

"Oh, yes, several." Peg's manner was most lugubrious.

20 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

The Captain broke loose. "Peggy, dear heart, if you were in danger, trouble, and I a thousand miles even from you, if you called I'd hear you."

Lady Peggy looked up with wide eyes into her handsome lover's face.

"Would you call, dear?" He asked it too gravely to admit of her ladyship's further raillery.

"I would." She said it under her breath as if to say it aloud might waken she knew not what that had hitherto slept, for her.

"Peg!" his arms were closing around her, his head was bent to seek her lips.

Her ladyship sprang from him to the window. "People!" she cried, "people! actually arriving at Punty's hotel."

"Only Lieutenant Thorsby," Churchill was beside her.

"No, it's not. It's two of them, on ponies; and they're not soldiers at all." Her ladyship loved the interlude that she knew would not last long.

"To please me, come away from that window;" Churchill added carefully, "you'll take cold."

"Never a cold!" coming away from the window though, and nearly upsetting the easel on her way. Churchill helped her to adjust it, also the draperies which had gotten awry, and to prop up

the vase of flowers on the stand near the portrait of her ladyship's defunct supposed spouse.

"There!" The easel was to rights and the Captain looked determined to say what he wanted to, when her ladyship, suddenly imbued with a desire for further prologue, in a melancholy if bewitching way, looked at him out of the corners of her deep blue eyes, and said, "You know whose picture this is, don't you, Captain Churchill?"

Captain Churchill answered tersely. "Porter told me." He folded his arms together and looked at Peggy steadily.

"Don't you want to see it?" she asked gently.

"I do not." The tone was low but far from gentle.

"He was very, very handsome." Lady Peggy sighed the reminiscent sigh of widowhood.

"I suppose so." Forbearance and wrath were commingled in the soldier-man's reply.

"And so devoted." Her ladyship's tone was one of sadness, and tender reminiscence.

"I don't doubt it." There was a pause, then he asked pointedly, "Do you always think of him?"

"Not — always —" in sweet hesitancy, "exactly."

"You do forget him sometimes?" Hope was apparently renewed in the Captain's breast.

22 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"Just occasionally. When Auntie lets me." Her ladyship drooped her eyelids, thus keeping herself well in the picture of bereavement.

"How long has he been dead?" Churchill spoke quickly.

"Four years: it was a railway accident in the Philippines. I was in England at the time."

"Porter told me all that;" he turned back to the window.

"Yes, I told Mr. Porter." Her ladyship took her scrap of a handkerchief from her pocket.

"And you cared very much about him?" The Captain of course left the window at the first flutter of that white flag of distress.

"About Mr. Porter?" innocently. (Porter was the Surgeon of the 42nd — aged fifty-three, weight 180.)

"No! about your husband?"

"Mr. Gratiot? I can't speak of that yet. By and by perhaps I can tell you all," she whisked the cambric morsel over her face to cover the smile she could not control.

"In the sunshine?" Churchill took her ladyship's hands once more, and also taking the flag of distress quite down, his rare fine smile met hers.

"Yes, in the sunshine," she whispered, drawing back a bit.

"We'll tell each other," he whispered. "Peggy, won't we?"

"Maybe so." Then her ladyship with a most adorable glance tripped off and away to her own room calling, "I'll be back by and by."

Captain Churchill, hearing Punty's voice and the voices of women, went outdoors; presently Punty ushered in two dripping girls, their long hair drenched, their felt hats over their eyes, their faces pale, their eyes afraid yet searching.

"This parlor's private, but the party what rents it's very accommodatin', and you ladies can just dry up a bit while my wife gets a room ready for you in the shack across the yard: this side is all full. The party what it belongs to is from New York," he added pompously.

The older girl asked, "Has anyone arrived here to-day or to-night?"

"No, miss, no one. Supper'll be ready soon. Set up to the fire." With which Punty went away.

The older girl, whose name was Florida Payne, said in a shaking voice, "He has not come yet."

The younger one, named Judy Payne, answered, "But he will, sister. Don't look so blue, poke up your feet and dry them, there! Luck's our way, dear, I know it is. I feel it racing along to meet us. It was best luck too, your learning at Fort Garry that Kent —"

"Hush-h!" Florida put up a warning hand.

"—had been there," pursued Judy in a whisper, "his pony broken a leg, been shot, and he off on a fresh mount leaving some papers in the sad-

24 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

dle bags." The young girl's tone was one of jubilant satisfaction.

"Judy, I'd give my life to get those papers." Florida sat crouched at the fire her hands clasping her knees.

"Pshaw! Kent'll make that all right with the commanding officer here, at Fort McHenry, won't he?" Judy's brown eyes, full of youth's carelessness and sureness, looked full at her sister's anxious face.

Florida glanced around, a very real terror in her white drawn face; then her eyes traveled back to her sister, and her voice fell.

"Judy, I've got to tell someone. I'll go mad if I don't."

"Flo, what is it?" The younger girl was frightened, and showed it.

"Kent came near being cashiered from the Service years ago. He swore to even up; for of course, he was innocent." She spoke with love's unquenchable belief. "He has evened it up." She shuddered, then went on in an almost inaudible tone, "He has been furnishing Japan with plans of the United States' fortifications for two years and more." Her wide brown eyes stared at her younger sister.

"A traitor!" Judy uttered it blankly, without attempted consolation even.

"Hush. Our government downed him for no cause. Kent could never have done what they

claim, and if he ever did, it must have been after the railway accident in Manila where he was taken for dead, and for a long time hadn't his reason. No one in the hospitals knew who he was for a twelve-month."

"I know all that," the little girl said; "but, dishonor," she added persistently.

"What's dishonor beside the love I have for him? I'd die for him." Florida Payne's head sank into her hands.

Then Judy cuddled Florida in her warm arms,—arms that trembled, lips that trembled, too, as she whispered: "Suppose they get him here, Flo, what then?"

"They'd shoot him to-morrow," the older girl answered dully. "But they shan't," her voice was firm now. "They may shoot me, but I'll get to Kent Gratiot first and save him. Judy, will you help me, now that you know all?" She pleaded with eyes and hands and with despair in every syllable. There was a silence between the two sisters, then Judy said, "Sure. You love him. Go across to our room. Watch out there. I'll wait here and carry our supper over myself when it's ready. He can't reach here before nine o'clock, even if he rides like the wind." She glanced at the clock.

Florida grasped Judy's arm, kissed her forehead, and then she went across to the room. Punty showed her the way. Judy went to the

26 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

window: she was watching her sister run across the yard, and she was reconnoitring as well, towards the road. Suddenly she heard a man's step right behind her; she turned around. Charley Thorsby stood at attention. He saluted, as he said to her, quite in a matter-of-course, but very delightful way, "Oh, you've come?" and his eyes danced, and his whole mind was on fulfilled presentiments.

Judy Payne bowed in a quaint little way she had; she was a wee girl with curly hair like the Lieutenant's, a wee nose, big eyes and lovely freckles on her red cheeks.

Finally she asked timidly: "Do you live here? I'm looking for milk. Please tell me where they keep the milk?" It was quite the voice of a child: and to him entirely adorable.

"In a tin. I wish I did live here, but I don't. I'm stationed at the barracks. I'm Charley Thorsby at your service." He saluted her with hand and eyes.

"A soldier!" Judy exclaimed in unconscious distress and surprise. Thorsby was in civilian's dress. Then she added, recovering herself: "My name's Judy Payne."

"It ought to be pleasure. If you won't mind my saying what I think?"

"I don't believe I'll mind." Then sorrow and stolen fort plans went by the board; and golden youth, and something that's called love stood together at the gate of a place called Paradise.

MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN 27

The wily Lieutenant then placed a surreptitious heel on the hem of Judy's frock, as he added, "I think you're the realest thing."

"Where's the milk?" the tiny maid inquired with dignity, although she felt of course that her hand was on the latch of the Gate of Paradise.

"But if I get the milk you'll go," he urged daringly.

"I must go anyway." She anxiously wriggled her frock.

"My frock is caught in the door, please."

"No, beg pardon, it isn't; the door," he opened it, "is doing its duty quite all right." And his air was one of perfect innocent simplicity.

"Do help me to get out." Judy tugged at her skirt. "Somebody's waiting for me!" She added this with a frantic endeavor.

"Let him wait," the answer came firmly and from Thorsby's soul.

"It's a girl," Judy laughed, pulling still at the unruly cloth.

"That's unlikely. If I let you go, will you come back? Promise?"

Judy nodded; then she discovered the cause of her detention, and laughed and cried both at once, mixed with a little indignation too.

"When will you come?" Thorsby disregarded the indignation completely. Judy looked scornfully at him: he looked at Judy not scornfully.

28 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"When do you wish I would come?" She asked it meekly.

"The very second after you go. Honest Indian, aren't you expecting someone to meet you here this evening?" His mind did return to duty; and he did wonder if this slip of a syren had come there to meet the man Churchill was after.

"No." She spoke with defiance. "I am not. I'm here with my sister: she isn't well. We're in the other shack yonder. I'm going to take over milk and things, until supper's ready."

"Let me help you?" The spy man jumped out of Thorsby's thoughts at once in face of that quick girlish recital of facts.

"No, no. I'll come back soon. 'Pon honor I will," she said frankly; "don't you believe me?"

Their eyes met in a curious but not unusual way—in fact the fashion of it is as old as Eden and as new as this year's sweet seventeen.

"Yes, I do." The young man said under his breath. "And I felt you coming. You are the jolliest ever, and those freckles on your blessed little nose are the fetchinest things I ever saw."

CHAPTER III

In which my Lady Peggy sticks to her colors, and finds herself in the middle of a frightful dilemma

"HUSH-H!" and then Judy was gone. He saw her however presently, carrying a tray across the yard and in his jubilant assured young mind, he called her "Mrs. Thorsby!"

In fact he was saying it aloud in gleeful tones when Lady Peggy came in from her dressing room.

"It's only I, Mrs. Gratiot," he exclaimed over her hand. "The Captain's in the yard, I think. He's expecting some men to meet him here — on — business."

"Indeed! I'm very glad you came over, Mr. Thorsby. The men the Captain expects have arrived, haven't they? I thought I heard them a while ago."

"No, not yet, Mrs. Gratiot." Thorsby's eyes traveled rather anxiously to the window. Her ladyship went straight to the window herself and peered out. Then in the yard, there arose as fierce and boisterous a clamor as one could wish. Horses neighing, men shouting, women screaming,

30 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

shutters banging. The tornado had reached the shack.

There were voices crying, "Steady! Grip him! Catch the brute! Lift the man! Look out for the pony's heels! Get him out of that mud pool!"

Thorsby at once, with a very authoritative hand, pulled her ladyship from the window far down the room, as he said, "Mrs. Gratiot, there's going to be shooting most likely." Then a bullet sang out.

"But where is Captain Churchill?" and her ladyship's blue eyes had the look in them of a shot partridge, so tender and so woeful.

"He's all right," Thorsby responded reassuringly; nevertheless he added, "Don't, for any cause, move up to that window. I must leave you and go out there." He was going when the door swung. Churchill and Punty came in carrying a stricken man between them.

Their burden was an unrecognizable battered form, the face covered with blood and mud; and black water dripping from every stitch of his garments.

Punty said conclusively, "Reckon he's a goner. I never saw such a throw in my life, sir."

The Lieutenant helped them to lay the man down on Lady Peggy's davenport. Lady Peggy herself, quiet, contained and womanly, snatched the drapery velvet from the easel, put it over him,

and ordered Punty to fetch hot water, towels and brandy at once.

As Punty went for them, Judy Payne thrust her head in the door: she beckoned Charley to her.

"What is it? Who is it?" the little girl gasped as her wild eyes took in the prostrate form on the sofa.

"We don't know who it is. Kingdom come for his I reckon though. His pony got the better of him; they've shot the beast." He almost put his arm about her, quivering as she was from head to foot.

"Oh, I heard it." She drew away into the hall, but her fascinated gaze remained fixed upon the prostrate figure of the man who they said was dead.

"Won't somebody 'phone to the Fort for the surgeon!" her ladyship spoke, in the anguish natural to the circumstances as she glanced at the Captain who was busy trying to listen to the stranger's heart.

"I'll 'phone." It was Judy who answered. "I know where the 'phone is. What's the Fort number?" Something urged her, she did not stop to think or query what.

"62 Main. Tell him life and death, and hurry, girl," Churchill spoke, adding as Judy Payne ran away, "I don't know who she is I'm sure, but Punty's busy. I need Thorsby here." The Lieutenant was assisting his superior officer

32 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

with the unknown man. "This is too much for you," Churchill added in a hurried tone to her ladyship.

Peggy shook her head and went on cutting at the man's vest, shirt and underwear. Punty then fetched in a basin and cloths.

"I made bold to tell Miss Burgoyne, Mrs. Gratiot," said the hotel man as he opened the door for her ladyship's aunt.

Miss Burgoyne was soon at the basin; she took a cloth, wrung it out and laid it softly on the patient's face. "Poor fellow," she whispered, "the mud's so thick you can't tell whether he's black or white." Then Miss Pam drew off the cloth, "Oh," she gasped, "he's — white." And then there came a strange hush and cease of doing anything over them all.

Her ladyship stared at the revealed face: her breath came too quickly; she sprang from her knees, the dripping cloths in her hands, her wide eyes turned upon the uncovered portrait on the easel. "Oh!" she panted and then she began shivering, quivering in every nerve and artery and vein.

Miss Burgoyne's glance followed her ladyship's; so did Punty's, so did the Lieutenant's. Jack Churchill's face was fixed upon the unconscious man's face with a curious half-triumphant, half-regretful expression. Thorsby touched the Captain on the shoulder.

Churchill looked up at the younger man and muttered, nodding his head, "We've got him sure; it's Gratiot."

"Hold on," Thorsby ejaculated painfully and under his breath, as he jerked his thumb from the man on the davenport to the man on the easel.

Churchill looked and rose from his knees. He went straight to her ladyship; her hands were outstretched; he took them in his; her ladyship whispered, "Is he dead?"

The surgeon heard her, for he had come by this, and was at the patient's side. "No, no, my dear lady, you needn't be afraid of having a dead stranger on your hands."

Churchill laid his hand on Porter's arm and indicated the portrait. He said, "Mr. Porter, the patient is Mrs. Gratiot's husband." The Captain and the Lieutenant left the room. The surgeon presently followed them, saying he would be back directly, that there was not the least danger; merely shock, bruises and a possible temporary absence of memory.

The door once closed upon the surgeon, her ladyship stood still where he had left her in the middle of the room, tall, straight, tearless, speechless.

"Didn't I tell you you'd live to regret your terrible folly?" Miss Burgoyne was livid with terror and would have been quite unable at any

34 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

time to grapple with any such situation as the one confronting her. Her niece remained silent.

"Can't you speak, Peggy? Say something! What are you going to do?"

Her ladyship then, it is true, burst into a great flood of tears, sobs, shivers, lasting not long however, for with a vigorous shake of her beautiful shoulders, she resumed control of the level. To herself she said, "Peg, my girl, it's your own beastly self-sufficiency that has fetched you where you are. Now, it is for you to decide what you'll do — make a clean breast of the whole thing, to everybody, Jack Churchill included, or — what is likely to be the alternative?" While Lady Peggy was lost in conjecture, her aunt dropped the sharp point of further inquiry into the midst of the silence.

"Peggy, what are you going to do?" she reiterated.

"I don't know," her ladyship's tone was full of gloom, in fact of despair.

"But you must do something." Miss Pam would like to have shaken her niece. "Let's run away, at once, now." Miss Pam was sobbing violently, even while she performed the act of bathing the head of the supposed husband of her niece.

Her ladyship surveyed her aunt and the subject of her aunt's ministrations; then, she drew her thoughts into form — she drew herself to-

gether exactly as if she were going to take a five-bar on an untried hunter: "Peggy de Bohun'll never run away from anything," she said. "I left town to get free of conventions, and fortune hunters: to get among people who don't know I have a cent, I took the name that wasn't mine. I'll stick to my colors."

"But, Peggy!" Miss Burgoyne was paralyzed, further articulation was impossible to her.

"Kent Gratiot doesn't know," her ladyship said. "And he may die!"

"If he only would!" Miss Burgoyne's accents were heartfelt. "Oh, Peggy, dear child, confess it to them," she implored as the man on Peggy's davenport moved the very least in the world.

Lady Peggy shook her head.

"Let me do it then?" Miss Pam's tone was pleading, imploring.

"Never." Her ladyship was not to be moved by prayers or tears.

"But if he lives, and they go on calling you Mrs. Gratiot!" Miss Pam was now almost in hysterics.

"I can't help it, Aunt Pam. I'd sooner die than strike my tent now. I'm built that way. I suppose I'm like the first Lady Peggy." Her smile was wan and self-contemptuous.

"Ridiculous. Suppose — suppose"— Miss Burgoyne was near to collapse—"Kent Gratiot

36 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

claims you as his wife and you not married to him at all! What then? What then?"

Her ladyship still stood just where Porter had left her: she was as white as the wall, and all the light was gone out of her eyes, but she no longer trembled; she was absolutely well poised and her handsome head was high in the air. She looked like to die maybe, but it would be dying game.

The surgeon at this moment came in, and up to her, first.

"It's a shock, Mrs. Gratiot. A remarkable shock. A double shock. Considering your devotion to the"—he glanced at the easel and the flowers on the stand by it—"memory of your husband you are to be congratulated. A very extraordinary case."

Her ladyship inclined her head.

Miss Burgoyne's sobs were the only sound. Porter administered a powder to the poor lady and courteously dismissed her with the remark that he "thought Mrs. Gratiot and he could work better alone with the patient. A wife's ministrations were always worth as much at least as a surgeon's," etc., etc.

The chaperone left the room, of course, but the misgivings of her soul were unnumbered and the agony of her mind was severe.

"Your husband's state, dear madame, is not critical," Porter vouchsafed. "No bones are broken. There may be trouble with the brain,

that is my only fear. Did his head use to bother him any?" he asked in a grave but kindly soothing way.

"I don't remember," the supposed wife spoke dully; the surgeon thought it the too-natural result of self-control.

"To be sure — the — er — separation has been lengthy and you must have been very young. Besides, the railway accident and his not — pardon me — seeking you out argues undoubtedly that his head was affected by that occurrence. When was it exactly?"

"What?" she asked vaguely and in as dull a voice as before.

"The railway accident." All the while of course Porter was manipulating and watching his patient.

"Oh, about four years ago, I think," her ladyship replied. As she watched the surgeon at his work, she was balancing it all up. Jack Churchill and the little song, and her willful tempestuous heart, and everything else; but she couldn't find courage to confess. She could only go on and stand firm for whatever might befall.

"Ah, well, well; we will see," the surgeon soothed. "I hardly believe there is any concussion, but we will be careful. With your ministrations, and restored to you, we can hope for the very best."

"Can we?" ejaculated her ladyship; the irony

38 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

and farcicalness of it all struck to her brain, and she almost laughed.

"Now, would you have the goodness, since there is no one else about, to get me my other bag of instruments outside there, and to order more hot water?"

"Certainly." Her ladyship walked out. She was gone some time. Mrs. Punty had to heat the water. Presently the patient opened his eyes.

"Hello," he murmured in a dazed way.

"Hello, Mr. Gratiot," Porter responded cheerfully.

Gratiot asked, "Who are you?"

"Surgeon James Porter of the 42nd Cavalry, sir, at your service, stationed at Fort McHenry." Then there was a silence.

Broken when Gratiot said resignedly, "Well, you've got me"; he even smiled.

"Going to get you well in no time." Porter was smiling too very blithely.

"What's the matter with me, sir; bullets?" Gratiot inquired.

"No! We put the lead into your horse: a devil! who threw and pounded you. Everyone thought you were settled." Porter was busy with mixing some medicine in a glass.

"This is Fort McHenry, I suppose?" Gratiot said it in a passive tone.

"No! no, it's Punty's hotel," the surgeon re-

plied pleasantly; "a nice comfortable little shack, as plains' shacks go!"

"Where are my coat and my papers?" the injured man asked peremptorily.

"Your papers are perfectly safe, sir," Porter replied reassuringly, "Captain Churchill has them."

Kent Gratiot attempted to spring up. "I must get my papers. They are very valuable legal business documents," then he fell back.

"Easy, Mr. Gratiot; you'll have to let go of business. I'll answer for your papers; they are safe, and will not be disturbed by anyone."

Gratiot turned his head. Was there then hope for him? Was he not found out? Had the papers perhaps been lost, trampled to bits? Should he get off?

"I've had a hell of a time, sir," he exclaimed. "I had to shoot one beast myself, at Fort Garry; he ran lame, just when I was nearing there; now I seem possessed with the idea I left my legal papers in that dead pony's saddle-bags. Did I? Do you know?"

"Apprehensive, eh?" Porter regarded his patient kindly. "Your papers are entirely secure, sir. If they were in the saddle-bags of the pony that lies out in the yard there, they are by this time in the iron safe at the Fort. Captain Churchill is a very careful officer and absolutely reliable."

40 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"Give me some brandy," was the hot rejoinder. "Let me get up, and get away. If it kills me, I must get up." He tried to and failed.

Porter gave him the brandy. "Now, sir, if you keep quiet, and if your head doesn't trouble you, you can get up by and by. I think you're all right. I'll put the X-ray on presently and we'll see about the possible clot on the brain." He spoke more to himself than to the man on the davenport.

"Don't do any damned fooling with me," Gratiot cried out. "I'd shoot you without a quiver if I had a gun. I'm going to get up," he added savagely, attempting to suit action to word.

The surgeon let him have his way: the patient soon sank down.

"Mr. Gratiot, look at this." Porter drew the easel with its portrait close to the davenport. "Look," he urged, even commanded.

Gratiot looked: "So they got me down fine"; it was laconically said, without a tremor, but with a thin ironic smile.

"Sir, ever since the report of your death in that Manila railway accident, Mrs. Gratiot has kept this near her, with flowers by it, so she tells me."

"Who is Mrs. Gratiot?" His narrow perplexed eyes sought the face of the professional man.

"She is — your wife, sir?"

CHAPTER IV.

In which my Lady Peggy learns that her choice is a spy

THEN the injured man smiled on, but cynically.
“Is her first name Florida?”

“No, her first name’s Margaret; they call her Peggy. You remember Peggy?” watching his patient closely.

“I do.” He spoke thickly; a thin stream of blood leaped into his face; the very name of her set it tingling in his veins.

At that very instant her ladyship crossed the corridor where the flimsy curtains swayed with the wind; in her hand she carried a lighted lamp.

“There she goes! Look! Your wife!”
Porter raised Gratiot that he might see her.

“If she only were!” Kent Gratiot thought he had beheld a vision: that death was near him, and that he was vouchsafed this strange glimpse as he should pass on into the great oblivion.

“But, my dear man, she is,” Porter protested earnestly. “All this time she has mourned for you; she has never married again, although I may say I fancy there’s been a close call lately. You’re the luckiest chap alive. Mrs. Gratiot is a gem.” That thin red streak on the patient’s

42 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

face told him his methods were succeeding: he was happy in his success.

The wounded man sat up. "What are you damned talking about anyway? Am I crazy?"

"You are not crazy, sir." Porter noted the free motions with delight.

"Is Lady Peggy here?" Gratiot's eyes were fastened upon the man who leaned above him.

"Lady Peggy, if the word pleases you," Porter spoke indulgently, "is here."

"And she is known to you as Mrs. Gratiot?" Kent Gratiot's brain was spinning as the machines spin in the factories that never rest.

"Just so." He was taking his patient's pulse.

"Bring her to me." His voice was low but filled with unspeakable impatience.

"With pleasure." The surgeon rose with an air of self-satisfaction, and went out: he met her ladyship coming from the kitchen with the bag and pitcher. "No need, dear Mrs. Gratiot; the knowledge of your presence has fetched a cure. Your husband is weak, but that's easily overcome. To-morrow he'll be himself. I'll look in again in a half hour." As he spoke smiling, he led her ladyship into the parlor; then he left them alone together.

"Peggy!" Gratiot's arms went out, his bewildered eyes drank in the loveliness of her.

Her ladyship did not come to him. She said: "Mr. Gratiot, there is a mistake, a misunder-

standing." How lame and futile and foolish she felt to herself in the face of this man's eager craving joy.

"The surgeon says you go by my name, that you are my wife?" There was intense wonder and intense passion in his tone.

"You know that I am not your wife." Lady Peggy looked full into his eyes now and the sorrow and shame of it, although bitter, did not crush and overwhelm her.

"I think you're not, but I can guess how it is." He spoke succinctly. "When you heard I was struck dead out in Manila, you found out you did love me, after all. Was that it, Peg?" Again his arms went out.

"No, that was not it." She said it gently, for the pain he would suffer hurt her too.

"Loved me so much," he went on blindly, "that you kept my picture always near you with flowers there? Ah, Peggy, and you took my name? The sweetest thing a girl could do. And to come back to life to find your love waiting for me is reaching heaven, dear. Come close so I can touch you." But he did not move and his memory was busy as he went on: "I did not seek you because your last word was final, I thought; so final that it pretty nearly made an end of me."

"Mr. Gratiot, it has been a foolish madcap whim. It might have been any man's name I

44 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

could have chosen. I chose yours because you were dead. We must forget each other. You must forgive my borrowing your name. I am stupidly proud. I can't tell these people here. I will leave at once. To-morrow I will be gone." She had not moved from her place by the big table.

Gratiot laughed a little. "Do you suppose I don't understand it all? Dear, you need not be afraid to confess it to me. I asked you to marry me a hundred times in Egypt. I had done so earlier in Washington, in London when I was attaché. That you at last love me is no shame."

"But I do not love you, Mr. Gratiot. I never did. You know that." She spoke with all the remonstrant gentleness a woman could summon.

But he was remembering a certain remark of Porter's as he asked her, "Do you love someone else?"

She drew herself up proudly, although her voice was very low as she answered. "Yes, I do."

Gratiot, his eyes on fire, managed to reach the brandy flask; he emptied it, then he turned his face to her, and like a tiger, he asked her, "Do you think I will let you go? These people here believe you to be my wife. So you will be. No matter who tries to come between us. They can't do it. Do you hear me? You've borne my name, you must have loved me. No man that lives'll get the girl from me that's called herself

Mrs. Gratiot." His head sank again on the pillow of her davenport.

Still she did not move.

Presently Porter returned with Punty, and between them they carried Gratiot to a room across the entry.

Mr. Porter had reflected; the whole situation struck him in new lights as he reviewed it, apart from its active members.

When he came back he found Gratiot entirely too much excited. Stronger it is true, but a strength the result of this very overexcitement, perhaps, and the empty flask, which he examined.

" You've had enough surprises, my dear sir. Now we'll give you absolute quiet." He looked the patient over critically, finding him in no very bad shape: being a well-knit, powerful man Gratiot had rallied splendidly already.

" You will allow Mrs. Gratiot to come too, Mr. Porter? " the injured man said dictatingly.

" No, not just now. I shall stop the night. I want to see your husband out of the woods, Mrs. Gratiot, before I leave him." He turned to Peggy as he said this.

Her ladyship bowed. She held up the lamp as the other two helped him out.

Then her ladyship closed the door and drew the curtains and set the broken shutter up on a chair against the window and flung a blanket over the portrait; threw the vase of flowers into the

46 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

fireplace and knelt down in the middle of the parlor and prayed fervently thus: "Dear Lord, please take Mr. Gratiot straight up into heaven to-night. I'm wicked and horrid, and worse than any girl that lives, but I just can't be brave enough to tell the truth to them all. Please take him to heaven."

Her ladyship at this juncture heard footsteps. She feared Kent Gratiot's return. She rose from her knees and flew up the little back stairs leading to her aunt's bedroom.

In fact the tail of her ladyship's frock was hardly out of sight when Judy had knocked; getting no answer, she opened and came in. Florida was with her.

"But are you positive the man who was thrown was not he?" the older girl's voice was anxious as she spoke.

"Can you imagine Kent Gratiot thrown off anything! I can't. I reckon that man's dead. They've carried him out of here anyway; to the stable, I suppose. When do they have supper in this place? Crackers and milk were not sustaining," was Judy's rejoinder.

"Judy." Florida was crouching again by the fire; she was cold to the heart and could not get warm.

"Well?" Judy asked, trying to be gay, and failing.

"Do you believe Kent meant to meet me?

meant that we should be married to-morrow at Gathrie?" Her forlorn attitude rent the little sister's heart.

The little sister therefore put up a juvenile bluff. "Now, Florida, I can't be surmising any such horrors. You adore Kent: of course he adores you! You're engaged and Daddy objected, and I, to please you, have eloped with you from the ranch, and we came to Fort Garry; then here, in pursuit —"

"'Pursuit!'" echoed the elder girl. "Hardly!"

"Well then," apologetically, "I mean, to meet him. Now, you spring it, 'Did he mean it?' Sure he did. Besides I've matters of my own to think of!" Little Judy thus thought to engage her sister's attention and arouse her curiosity and amuse her.

"What? for heaven's sake!" So apprehensively was it spoken that all little Judy's plans went for nothing.

"For milk," said Judy resignedly, letting go her plans for amusement with a bump of prudence.

"Judy! To be thinking of milk when I'm nearly crazy about Kent." She rocked back and forth in sheer anguish.

"Well," the girl with the freckles allowed, "I'm almost crazy about — the milk! I'll can it though, Flo dear, and cork it up tight; well then,

48 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

sober, don't look so serious! Someone got me to telephone to the Fort for the surgeon when that man was carried in here. So I have the number; it's a party wire; I can go out again. Nothing doing in that part of the shack and if there's any 'phoning about Kent, I'll get on the job; don't cry!" She patted Florida's hair as she went toward the door.

" You're a brick; but take care you're not seen." Even as Florida Payne was speaking, Lady Peggy appeared on the little landing; neither of the girls saw her. Florida went on: " I can't help the feeling, Judy, that Kent Gratiot never meant to come here"—her voice was intense, and bitter in its strain—" that he knew the risk was too great, after the loss, and that someone at the Fort might be on his tracks." Florida looked into her sister's gay little face with cruel intensity.

" Pshaw! Flo, don't be silly: I'll be back with the report soon." Little Judy was gone; her ladyship had come slowly down the stairs, and as Florida Payne turned from her sister she encountered Lady Peggy.

" Did you overhear my conversation with my sister?" the plains-girl spoke at once, and defiantly, as if saying good-by to all conventions.

" Yes, part of it," was Lady Peggy's rejoinder as she scanned the girl who addressed her.

" Did you hear the name I mentioned?" Florida asked tensely.

"Yes." Her ladyship said the monosyllable quietly.

Florida drew nearer to the other girl. "Do you know anything of the man whose name I spoke?" The same defiance, but accentuated twofold, was in this question too.

"Yes."

"You are an officer's wife or sweetheart? and the men, or a man, from Fort McHenry is waiting for the man I named, to come?" Florida's whole air was suppressed but frenzied.

Her ladyship looked back at the entry. "The man is here," she whispered.

"Where? How do you know? I've kept such a watch. I am to be married to him to-morrow." The defiance was keener than ever now.

Lady Peggy said gently, "He was thrown and hurt, but not fatally."

"That was he then? Take me to him!" Her appeal was wild and dictatorial; the other girl stared at her.

"I will send him to you." Lady Peggy believing she could set things right between man and girl, went out.

In a few seconds Kent Gratiot staggered into the parlor; her ladyship closed the door after him as she went back to her room: the lamplight was feeble, he did not see distinctly, but he spoke with a dare-devil manner. "Someone to see me. Who are you? What do you want?"

50 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"It's I, Kent." Florida Payne tried to turn up the lamp. "Judy and I rode to kill through the hurricane so as to reach here and warn you in time." She failed at the lamp and darted up to him in the shadowy room.

"Of what?" His voice was resonant, hard, unwelcoming.

"You had not been away from Fort Garry an hour when they found your papers; the plans for the Golden Gate fortifications and the letters from Tokio, under the saddle blanket." Her voice was very low and she was very close to him.

He took the lamp from her and set it down, but he did not reckon at all with the girl's palpitating nearness. "Well, you got the papers, of course?" Just then he did glance at her.

"No, I couldn't," she trembled.

"Hell! Who did get them?" he asked harshly.

"A man named Captain Churchill. Judy found out that he has a roving commission and is at present stationed here at Fort McHenry."

He looked the girl over. "You must get back to your father," and the brutality that is latent in some men leaped to the front and stared out of his eyes into hers.

Florida looked at him and her arms went about him. "I risked my all; I left home to meet you. I risked my life to come here," she murmured as she clung to him. "They suspected me at Fort

Garry. I know they did. My only thought was to save you, and that we should be married to-morrow," and her young lips went towards his.

He put her from him as gently as his nature allowed. "Flo, my girl, I belong to another; it dates back nearly seven years. She thought me dead. I've met her again, here. You and Judy must get back to the ranch and your father."

Florida fell in a crumpled heap at his feet. There was a bit of silence, then she said: "Save yourself. Take my pony; he's in condition, and no matter about the storm; go for your life. That's all I care about now," and the desolation of after-death sounded in her quivering voice.

"I don't stir from where she is." Gratiot hurried out. "You might as well talk to the Pacific. I don't care if I'm caught, shot, dead. Florida, go back home."

"Is it the girl who sent you in here to me?" He nodded and ruthlessly left her. In a moment she went after him, but as she crossed the entry by the kitchen, she heard Punty's bluff voice saying,

"Mrs. Gratiot's got a kind of a set-back, her and the Captain, I reckon!" Florida halted, went into the kitchen and sat down by the stove, while Punty and his wife told her all the gossip of the station and the Fort.

CHAPTER V

In which my Lady Peggy asks her lover for the other man's life and gets it

WHILE Florida sat listening, Charley Thorsby and Captain Churchill came into the parlor, one by a door, the other by the window; this latter the Lieutenant, who landed in, just as the Captain was accustoming his sight to the gloom and finding out that Lady Peggy was not there.

“What in thunder!” Which was apt, for the thunder was crashing and the lightning blazing, as it does over yonder, big and undulatory, with the wind trying to do it louder.

“Only I!” Thorsby said, scanning the dim parlor with its infinitesimal spot of oily light.

They met together then, and their hands grasped and their eyes locked.

“Brace up, old man,” the junior said, letting go the other’s hands and plunging his own deep in his pockets.

“Gad! it’s tough.” That was all Churchill said.

Thorsby cried, “It’s rotten. What in hell a chap wants to come back from heaven for, I don’t see! No girl ever wants him.”

MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN 53

Churchill laughed grimly: "Perhaps she is glad of him."

"Perhaps this shack is a palace." Then a silence. "She's his wife, though," he added, sighing, "and what are you going to do?"

"Get out." It was succinct and characteristic.

"But, old man!" the Lieutenant jumped buoyantly to the relief. "Gratiot's got to die; the boys are in the stable waiting for the word; Colonel's making the wire busy wanting to know what you sent for them, for. As long as he's got to go up the highest ever, you know, you might as well be cheerful over it."

Churchill sat still, then he exclaimed: "The man is badly shaken up."

"All the easier to take"; it was jauntily spoken by six-and-twenty.

"Boy," Churchill's voice was in the remonstrant key, "he's her husband, and to hand him over to a sure bullet is not to my liking."

"It would be just my choice if I were in your place," remarked Mr. Thorsby, easily substituting himself, mentally, and the freckle-faced girl for the other two.

"Charley, I'm going to see her just once more to say good-by." There was the break of a big heart in Jack Churchill's words. Thorsby tried to laugh at the break-of-heart as he replied:

"A minute spent with a girl increases faster than any sum ever put into any bank. Make it

54 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

fifteen. I wish that pony had kicked Gratiot into wherever he belongs. I can't bear to see you cut up, Captain."

Churchill did not answer, other than to say, "Come on. I'll go out and see the boys first and then 'phone the Colonel myself. Jove! I can't nab the man until I've made it square with her." They went outside together and as they went, her ladyship, quite calm, very white, but not trembling, came into the room, beckoning Florida Payne after her.

"There is no one here now," she said. "Captain Churchill and Lieutenant Thorsby have gone. If you want to speak to me, this is a better place than the kitchen. This room is really my aunt's and mine. Sit down."

"I don't want to sit down." Florida's accent was fiercely antagonistic as she went on. "They say you're Kent Gratiot's wife? I came here to meet him. I ran away from home; we were to be married to-morrow at Gathrie. Now, he tells me you are his wife. He tells me to go home." It was bluntly said; a blank almost an unanswerable speech.

Lady Peggy stood leaning against the table with both hands behind her, grasping its marble edge tensely.

"Yes," she said presently and very gently, "go home," and her emphasis had in it the yearning that the old word calls up.

MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN 55

Florida came up to the table too. "Not as long as he's in danger," her eyes were filling, but her manner was savage yet.

"He's in no danger at all," Lady Peggy hastened to say. "Mr. Porter, the surgeon, just told me as he was leaving that Mr. Gratiot was in good condition, and that it was marvelous."

"I reckon you don't know much about your husband, do you?" the forlorn girl said in a curious way.

"I know little of Mr. Gratiot." But the battle in her ladyship's heart was a wild one: one second, it was to strike her colors and creep away beaten, broken, a silly stupid trifler of a woman, unfit for any gallant man to wed; the next, it was to hold on stanchly to the plank she'd so buoyantly thrown down, until she could pick it up and quit the field in decent form.

Florida continued in a sharp whisper: "He's a spy, a traitor! he's the man that for years has baffled the whole Secret Service, and given the fortification plans to a certain foreign government. And that other man, Captain Churchill, the man these people say you would have married if your husband had not turned up, is the man who has trapped Kent Gratiot. To-morrow they will shoot him." She was a heap on the rag carpet again.

Her ladyship knelt beside her. "Do you love Kent Gratiot?" Peggy whispered.

56 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"I love him." The fire of a first overmastering passion was blazing its way from the heart to the lips of this plains-girl.

"I don't," her ladyship spoke firmly. "I am not—" then Lady Peggy heard a voice that she knew in the entry, and she stopped short. "Not," her ladyship proceeded, "going to see him harmed."

"Can you prevent it?" Florida looked at her in amazement. "Captain Churchill, they say, has the papers left at Fort Garry," she spoke breathlessly, "and if he has them, he must take his man — and that means —"

"He may have all the papers in the world," said her ladyship, "but I tell you, nothing shall happen to Kent Gratiot. Now, you go away to — your sister, is it? because Captain Churchill has asked to see me, and I wish to see Captain Churchill."

"You're strange, aren't you?" Florida Payne looked now at Peggy de Bohun.

"I suppose I am," her smile was there, but it was shadowy and wan.

As Florida went out, the voice that her ladyship had heard a few moments before was heard again in the yard, along with the buffet and blow of the storm.

It said: "Tell them to wait until I give the word."

Then as her ladyship was going out to meet

Jack Churchill, she met Kent Gratiot instead. "Come here," she said to him with quiet authority.

He obeyed only too quickly: he was not, as Porter said, in too bad shape; he had persisted in keeping on his own tattered, mud-stained garments, which Mrs. Punty had decently dried at the kitchen fire.

Lady Peggy shut the door; she was gallant from the crown of her nut-brown head to the tips of her slippers; gallant and game.

"Mr. Gratiot, I know your position now from A to Z. There's no time to talk. You are not wounded. Your condition is almost normal, the surgeon has told me so. You are now warm and fit? Go, there are three fresh ponies in the rear stable: all are mine; they are marked with a VX brand. Mount and get away."

"Not a step without you. You're mine." He took up a nonchalant stand at the mantel shelf, leaning against it.

"We both know that's not true. I have given my word to the girl you are engaged to," her ladyship spoke clearly, "that harm shall not touch you. I owe you that much for the loan of your name. There is a bridle path, not ten paces down the road to the left, in the cactus; follow it and you gain the Blue Gulch and a cave. Once there, you're safe. I'll find a way to send someone to you before to-morrow night. Go."

58 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"Too late," he muttered laconically, without moving a muscle.

"It's not," she said with authority.

"Unless you'll go with me?" Then her eyes blazed but he went on. "I don't know one inch about the Blue Gulch or the cave. I'm a stranger here."

"I'll show you the way as far as the cactus." But she was plucky.

Again her ladyship heard the Captain's voice outside saying, "Very good. Keep ready."

Gratiot smiled. "Churchill, I suppose?" Her ladyship inclined her head. "He's the chap that's been sharp enough to locate me. Look out for him if you really mean to help me out."

"He shall not touch you." Her ladyship said it as a queen might issue an edict.

Then Gratiot was so uncomprehending and so like some other men, that he greedily seized Lady Peggy de Bohun and had nearly kissed her; but that her ladyship had soft strong little hands and these fought her into a very prompt freedom.

Did Gratiot believe that she loved him? Of course he did.

She whispered, "Go out to the kitchen; sit awhile; then to the woodpile, and wait till I come."

He went on believing it too. He did just as she said.

Her ladyship, her heart jumping like a spent

rabbit's, heard the Captain at the door as he tapped. She said, "Come in."

He came in. He came up to her; his face was grim and gray, old and worn, but fixed with the lines of an apparently unalterable determination about the jaw. Yet there was a desperate forlornness too.

"I want just to say good-by," he whispered a bit lamely. "You know what was in my heart. It's there still; it never can be downed. And whatever comes, try to remember, when honor calls, a man must answer and do. Will you?" His eyes were bitterly anxious in their intensity.

Her ladyship spoke quickly, under her breath, "There is no time now to — to talk of just him and me, but don't judge me yet. Wait for that. I am aware that Mr. Gratiot is the man for whom you have been looking: the spy; I know that in three minutes maybe your men will put him in irons; to-morrow he will die." His eyes were in hers. "You can save him; will you do it?" It was a rigid second of time that ticked away between this man and this woman.

He folded his arms and stared at her. "Do you love him so much as this?"

"Do you love me enough to let him escape?" Her lids were down, her voice low and broken.

"My girl, you don't know what you ask."

"Only that you turn your eyes away," she said

60 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

almost lightly. "It might happen so. And it's a life!" Her voice was pleading, tender.

Churchill did not stir: his eyes seemed to brood upon her ladyship's face; then he asked her, "A man's life, and a woman's happiness?"

"Yes," she assented eagerly for she was thinking of Florida Payne.

"Ah, Peg!" His arms went out, and then fell at his side. She had not drawn back. She had not moved. "But you are sacred," he whispered. "Good-by. Go and start him off." He turned on his heel.

Lady Peggy ran to him near the door.

"I shall be here to-morrow, will you come?" she whispered.

He raised to her the most sorrowful, despairing eyes her ladyship ever had seen. None of the men she had known had ever shown their like.

"I once told you if you called I would come. I will if I am alive. Good-by."

He touched her hand with cold and gentle fingers, and Peggy was alone.

CHAPTER VI

In which her ladyship's lover signs away his life for her sake; and hears her calling him from afar

SHE rushed up the stairs, and as she went she pressed the hand his had touched to her own warm lips.

Outside in the entry the Captain met the Lieutenant, who held his watch in his hand.

"I knew it would be fifteen minutes, sir; it's thirteen and a quarter." Thorsby tried to laugh but broke. "I say, old man, I'm with you, only I can't get it into words. It's about the roughest proposition blooming Fate ever got off. But," he glanced out toward the shack where the men were dawdling in the open doorway, notwithstanding the fury of the storm, which was by this much worse than it had been, then back to his superior officer as much as to say, "Well, when?"

Churchill answered by a shrug of the shoulders, and an entirely nonchalant glance. "Go; shut those doors, Charley; go; and treat the men well; give them something warm; it's a hell of a night."

"But — ?" the Lieutenant touched his cap.

The Captain nodded. "The man that's going to be shot to-morrow's safe, my boy. He can't

62 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

get away from me; mark that," laughing grimly. "I'll watch out while you all take your grog." He drew his pistol out and looked it carefully over as he stood in the entry between the kitchen and the porch doors.

"Do you know where Gratiot is now, Captain?" Young Thorsby's emphasis was a doubting one.

"I know where he is now," he replied emphatically and with dismissal.

Thorsby obeyed orders. As soon as the Lieutenant was well inside the closed door of the bar shack, Churchill reentered the parlor.

The crash of the thunder echoed up and down the narrow plateau valley, and sang back and forth from peak to peak; and the lightning flashed its own answers; the hail rattled and the wind shrieked. Churchill heard it all, but piercing it as a needle pierces, so attuned was he to her and all concerning her, he also heard the stealthy tread in the mud, the splash in the pools, of a tethered pony's hoofs; the clink of an undoing chain; voices, low though they were, and a make-off; then he heard feet creeping by the old stable; and hoofs pounding, fit for two beasts instead of one.

He had heard a window close above him; he knew her ladyship's room was aloft; he fancied her having watched Gratiot getting away, and, relieved, unstrung, falling in a heap and crying. He crossed to the foot of the little staircase she

was used to trip up and down, so blithely, coming to greet him, leaving him with adieu, and he fell on his knees. No prayer was on the soldier man's lips. Just a few rueful words, spoken up to the place he thought she was in. " You didn't know, Peg, the only way to let a traitor escape, is to shoulder his crime. The man who does it deserves the traitor's fate. But you didn't know that my dear, my dear."

Then Jack Churchill got up from his knees and stood stock-still, his hand on his hip pocket, his fingers closed over the iron warm from his own warmth and contact. The sense of that warmth struck the big thought of Life in deep to his soul.

He, Churchill, was alive, breathing, strong, able, and yet, in the teeth of this that had befallen him, he was as powerless to help himself as any child born that day. He began to pace up and down the little happy room where he had first seen Peggy; he crossed to the window and stared out into the blackness of the night, his eyes now and again dazzled by the jubilant lightning. He questioned God in heaven. He questioned his own brains and heart.

What had he promised her?

He had promised her to "turn his eyes away." In other words, to let the most arrant scoundrel and traitor who had ever disgraced the Service, get away.

As Churchill put his promise into blank lan-

64 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

guage, the drops stood out on his forehead, on the backs of his hands. He sat down by the table.

Had he, then, Churchill taken upon himself, upon his own shoulders, the damnable burden of treachery?

Why! he was then as bad as Gratiot. He got up to his feet once more, and his mind was in such chaos that, as he felt the iron again in his pocket, he had just one swift tempting impulse to put an ounce of lead into himself and so escape the whole miserable matter.

Then he laughed a bit grimly.

He was no coward. Not he.

Traitor he was going to be surely, for her sake.

Yes, for her sake. What was a man's love worth after all, if it dropped to the zero point when he found the girl he wanted could never be his?

Was not her happiness — not his own — the paramount issue?

Whatever it might be to other men, the happiness and peace of mind of this girl whom Churchill loved as men seldom do love, was the paramount issue.

For himself? What did it matter? Lacking Peg, life was of no account: a thing easily given up.

He did think of his career, of his name, his honor, his family, his country, the Service, the men who had been his friends; all these facts rushed

through his head pêle-mêle, only after all to dissolve themselves into one single steady fact.

To her he had made a promise.

To her he would keep and fulfill it.

There was but one way to keep it, and that was to take upon himself the crime of which the other man was guilty.

Yes; this is just exactly the fashion in which Churchill, modern every-day American man figured his problem and settled it.

Once settled, he wasted no more minutes in going over the ground but sat down at the table, drew up the inkstand, paper, envelope, took the pen and wrote, this, after the formalities of date, place, officialisms, etc.: "To make a long story short. I am the traitor and I am ready to pay the penalty. I have the honor to be, sir, your obedient servant,
JOHN CALVERT CHURCHILL."

As he signed his name, the soldier man drew the pen back quickly; he even smiled; he was remembering back in the Philippines the strange case of the traitor, very much such a traitor as he was just proclaiming himself to be, for whom, when the United States came to try him it was found there was no law to cover or include the crime or its consequences.

What a pity that since that day a law had been framed, that he himself had been on an advisory board, in connection with it; that — pshaw!

What use had he now for his life since her lady-

66 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

ship belonged to another. You see Churchill's was one of the big strong natures that things go deep and hard with; one of the A to Z men who love one woman once in their lives and reckon that woman the one thing that makes life worth living.

He was unusual in seeing it that way, but he was as he is portrayed.

So he folded, sealed and addressed the letter to the commanding officer at Fort McHenry, laid down the pen and sat still; the lamp waned, the wick was short, the oil near spent; the storm broke more madly than ever; then the pitiful wick lost its last few drops of fuel even, and the place was plunged in total darkness save for the lightning.

Presently Churchill heard doors bang, and Thorsby, with a questioning tap, opened, letting in a beam from the dirty globe in the entry.

"Come in, lad," the older man said kindly.

"Pardon, sir, but the men —"

"Getting restive, eh?" Churchill interrupted.
"Send them along back to the barracks. Tell them to go to bed. They won't be needed."

"But, Captain, won't Gratiot fight?" Thorsby's eyes were big with ill-repressed curiosity.

"No, Gratiot won't fight. He's safe." The shadow of a smile haunted his mouth as he made his reply.

"All right, sir." Yet Thorsby lingered, wistfully it seemed.

MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN 67

"Yes, it's all quite right." The soldier-man's tone was final but it was dull and spiritless.

"After I send the boys off, sir, shall I come back and stop with you?" Thorsby was not satisfied and his young face showed it.

"Yes," spoken not peremptorily but concludingly.

Then Thorsby went out; as he crossed the entry a tiny figure flitted down a few steps of the public staircase, then darted back, then forward.

The Lieutenant could sense those golden freckles even in the gloom. He made a bound up ten steps and caught her by the wide ribbon at her waist, wet and dripping, no doubt from her journey across from the other shack.

"After milk again?" he queried cheerily.

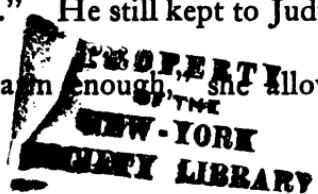
"No. Let me go." Judy's speech argued irascibility.

"Not until you tell me why you came over here at this time of night?" The Lieutenant's response savored of determination as he held on courageously to the ribbon.

"I thought, we thought there was more trouble over here," she hastily corrected. "Is there? Who's arrived?"

"No one. You saw no one arrive. You are telling lies. You will go to a hot place if you are not careful." He still kept to Judy's waist ribbon.

"This is warm enough," she allowed, feeling



68 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

a certain fire burning in her round, freckled cheeks.

"Tell me the truth," he said, piecing things together in his mind. "Did you see ponies going, Miss Judy?"

"Coming. Coming!" she asseverated getting repossession of one length of her sash.

"How many?" The young officer's accent was direct and brooked no prevarication.

The young girl felt this as she answered, "Two."

"A man on each?" It was asked eagerly.

"Yes, a man on each; at least I suppose a man; one couldn't swear to that in the darkness."

"Well, I reckon you were dreaming. No one has arrived. I'm sending my men back to the barracks now. The Captain's orders. And my orders to you are the same — back to your barracks. One moment, Miss Judy! those little feet must not be wet again." With which recommendation, Thorsby picked up the little girl and carried her down, out, across, and into the shack, kissed her ribbon and left her: laughing, crying, angry, happy, bewildered as she reached Florida. They then both watched the soldiers leave, from behind their calico curtain, by the light of the lanterns below.

Thorsby went back to the parlor to find his superior officer sitting exactly as he had left him. The Captain did not even look up, as the Lieu-

MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN 69

tenant set the lamp he had fetched on top of the piano.

Neither one spoke for probably two hours: they smoked, pushing fusees and cigars back and forth; the storm grew and made more noise than it had, even when Gratiot had come his cropper. The little clock on the mantel ticked on to two A. M.

About then Churchill broke silence; pushing the letter he had written towards Thorsby, he said: "Will you give that to the Colonel when you go over in the morning?"

"Sure." Thorsby never lifted his eyes, but put the letter in his pocket; he was keen and felt the nervous strain his companion was under, but he did not comprehend it completely. Yet he knew enough to be silent. He saw a pack of cards lying there, and mechanically began a game of solitaire.

The clock ticked away another hour; it wasn't a striking timepiece, so even that little break didn't occur.

Three A. M. and the winds and the clouds, and the whole artillery of the vault doing their level most.

The Captain had just lighted a fresh cigar. Thorsby was dealing a new hand, when the older man started, the weed fell to the floor, his fingers grabbed the chair arms, fit to bite through the wood.

70 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

" You heard her, didn't you? " Churchill gasped; then he stood up.

" Heard whom? what? " Thorsby stopped with his deal.

" There! " the soldier-man darted to the foot of the stairs, " Peggy's voice calling, ' Jack! Jack! ' Come, Thorsby, you hear her, don't you? " He rushed back and grasped Thorsby's arm.

The Lieutenant was of course on his feet too by this time. " No, I don't, old man, but I was thinking of someone else — so perhaps —"

" There! Again! " Churchill gripped the spindle balustrade, a faint smile on his lips. " Of course you heard her then? There! now! " he shook Thorsby. " She's calling, ' Jack, help.' God! Her room's above this. I'll —"

He sprang up three at a time. One door was closed; that he knew to be Miss Burgoyne's: the other, as the lightning flashed its brilliant stream, he saw was ajar, and he heard again her ladyship's voice, poignant, distressful, like to rend heart of stone, " Help! Jack; help! Come."

The Captain held back no longer, but sprang into her ladyship's room; flash upon flash revealed it to him as tenantless. The smooth little bed was empty, the pillows were unrumped; nor stitch nor show of garments or shoes about; the window was shut, the curtains were drawn. And yet, again, he heard that piercing cry for succor in

his ears. Then silence: even the thunder was hushed while the lightning played on the walls of that treasure-place, his lady's bower.

Churchill did not hesitate an instant this time, but dashed headlong down the little ricketty stairs, taking Thorsby by the arm, dragging him into the yard, searching the stables rear and fore.

"Her ponies are gone!" the Captain cried under his breath.

"Yes, sir; no VX brand on either of these beasts," replied the Lieutenant.

"Hold this brute by the mane a second will you, boy?" Churchill had a mount by the nose, out from the stall, in the yard.

Thorsby held the animal, a restive black, no saddle, no bridle, just the halter rope. Churchill was up before the young man had space for speech or thought: but as the Captain bent to slip another knot in the rope, Thorsby ventured, "Mrs. Gratiot has, maybe, gone away with her husband, sir," and his tone was that of one who risked another's anger, but did it for duty's sake.

Churchill laughed aloud.

"Don't be a fool, Charley. I'm off to answer her call; but I pledge you my word the traitor'll be on deck for his bullet before sundown to-morrow."

"How'll you know which road to take, sir?" The Lieutenant was bewildered, but respectful.

"I'm taking the road she took." The soldier

72 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

man's voice was irritated, impatient of the other man's stupidity and deafness. "Man alive! I've only got to follow the lead of her voice. I hear it all the time. Don't you? So long!" His beast pitched out of the yard under pressure of the worst dig a boot heel had ever given him in his merry life. And Thorsby stood alone. After a while he took to contemplating a curtained window in the annex shack.

CHAPTER VII

In which Lady Peggy leaves another town, at midnight, this time, and with the other man; and calls the Captain to her

HER ladyship then had left here too?

It remains to be imagined rather than described what the feelings, lamentations, conjectures, despairs, et ceteras, of the entire Punty household were, when at three-thirty A. M., having been wrested from peaceful slumbers by Captain Churchill's precipitate vault from her ladyship's chamber, down and out, and off and away, Miss Buygoyne had sought her niece's company and found instead the unmistakable and extraordinary records of a flight.

Rather it is the province of this tale to speed after my Lady Peggy, who, it is indeed perfectly true, had gone, as Thorsby said, with her supposed spouse.

It was a positive fact that Lady Peggy herself, in her long-tailed cloth frock, not daring to change it lest her aunt should waken, enter, question and frustrate her, had saddled her two ponies, the one side, the other cross; had led them, coaxing, against the storm, cautiously around the hotel,

74 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

across puddles ankle deep, but unheeded by her ladyship's velvet shoes; and to the woodpile, where most assuredly Kent Gratiot, awaited her.

It was a strange, uncanny, tense moment. Even the man in his madness of joy at sight of her by the gleam felt this, and was silent.

"Are you up?" she asked.

"No, not until I lift you," he answered.

"I am up," proudly. "Now?"

"Yes, all right." Gratiot laughed with the storm.

"Give me your bridle." Lady Peggy's intonation was one of matter-of-fact command.

He obeyed her.

"There," she added, "now your pony can't stray. I have him locked to mine."

"Peggy!" he could not forbear her name as their horses, flank to flank, his own knee touching her ladyship's skirts, they walked their horses out of the yard of Punty's hotel. Then came a trot, a canter, a mad, mad gallop with the wind for a whip, the sky-flash for a pilot; close, close together, man and maid, her hands guiding, his reaching for hers, riding for his life.

Suddenly she reined in both animals, bringing them to their haunches quickly enough to unseat riders less experienced.

"One second," she cried. "I am almost sure this is the opening to the path through the cactus, but we must wait for another flash to be sure."

Gratiot's hand came over both of hers now, gripping their two bridles, and, in the streak that then illumined their way, Lady Peggy felt herself compelled to look at him. For all his throw, and weakness, and excitement of that day, Gratiot was too powerful a man under the tonic of Peggy's nearness, to be apparently much the worse for his day's exploits.

Her eyes did meet his then but for one second only, and all the recompense he got was the unflinching glance of a girl whose courage was dauntless and wonderful.

"Ah!" she presently exclaimed as the heavens flamed, "I see this is our path. I thought it was." She essayed to guide to the right. "We turn in here, Mr. Gratiot," jerking the bridles. "Is it not lucky there is such a storm? Every hoof track washed out as soon as it's trodden in. I said, this way," her ladyship's tone was insistent, her wrists more so. They were now again in total darkness save for a rim of visionary grayness along a supposable horizon.

"I heard you, Lady Peggy; but we're not taking that way." He held the ponies at a standstill while the rain poured in sheets, and his voice was as low as her own, as keenly clear, not a hint of indirection or hesitancy.

"I don't understand you, Mr. Gratiot." She spoke quietly. "This is your one chance. A cave sounds silly and like a story book, but it's

76 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

going to be your salvation. I discovered it myself, and only one other person knows of it at all."

"Who is that other person?" As he asked there was a struggle between their four hands, their twenty fingers, the man of it and the woman of it, for possession of those leathers.

"Who is that?" Gratiot reiterated as the battle went on.

"Captain Churchill." Her strong, capable small hands were making one last frantic essay.

"I thought so," he must have smiled grimly, for the emphasis was sardonic.

Then the man won out, as man's muscle must.

Her ladyship lost the helm. She tried to rein in and she said, "You will not save yourself, Mr. Gratiot?"

"Not that way," he replied in a triumphant tone.

"What way then?" she asked, still trying to regain her lead, for the ponies under Gratiot's guide were going a slow pace, gleam after gleam showing the poor highway little else than an endless string of pools, more or less deep or shallow.

"My way, Peg." His laugh was a bit devilish.

"Mr. Gratiot," she made to disengage her own bridle from his. "If you know a way to save yourself, follow it at once; I am going back. Release my reins if you please."

MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN 77

He guided as close to her as flesh could come, his free arm went around her, his breath was on her ladyship's cheek.

" You're going forward, Peggy, my own, with me, to Gathrie Station. I know the road. You'll never go back. Ah, my love, don't shrink from me. You love me. No? It's yes. I'll never give you back your lines. I guide from this on. If you shriek even, there's no one to hear. God! girl! you must have cared for me, since it was my name you singled out of the whole world full of men to call yourself by." There was an exultant strain in his words, and there was also the show of a certain plausibility. This could not be denied.

Peggy had freed one hand and she snatched at the leathers; but uselessly. Gratiot was master now.

" Do you mean, Mr. Gratiot, that you are taking a girl by force to a place she does not want to go, and that girl the one who has come out on a night like this to save your life for you?" Her voice was hot with scorn and the impotence of her position.

" Yes, that's what I mean, Peg, because she's the girl I love!" He struck his heels into his beast's sides; her beast felt the impact, and urging the two mounts with every nerve in him, they were soon at top speed; through water up to their knees, mud splashing to their eyes, blinded, with alter-

78 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

nate streak and gloom, on! on! the locked ponies plunged. Gratiot's right arm was around Lady Peggy; he felt the warmth of her through the drenching wet, he felt her sobs, heard her words, her prayers, sensed her trials to throw herself, but Gratiot did not let up. Like a centaur bearing off his prey, he sat his mount as if one with it, and held the girl to hers.

He heard her ladyship call the other man too, and smiled to himself in derision.

"Jack!" she cried. "Jack, come! Help! Help! Come!" but Gratiot gripped her the nearer to him.

The gray line of horizon widened, the thunder broke loose again from yonder like a giant refreshed; the flashes zigzagged the whole heavens; the road was a river, when Gratiot and her ladyship got to the Station, a shack of the calibre of Punty's, at Gathrie.

As he swung his pair into the yard of the hotel, Lady Peggy de Bohun swooned in her saddle, and it was a mermaid of a girl, with long streaming dark locks, closed eyes, tense blue lips, that Gratiot lifted and carried in, and up to the best room over the bar.

Walsh, the man who kept the house, drew aside the gaudy calico curtains from the alcove and said, "You can lay the lady there, Mr. Gratiot. Everyone's away to the round-up at Bar 14, my woman and all. I've been expecting you since

noon; I thought the lady was to come early yesterday too, with her sister?"

Gratiot laid her ladyship down on the bed and chafed her hands.

"Brandy," he said. "Walsh, brandy, the best you've got, quick!"

In two minutes it was there and he was forcing open her lips and pouring in half a teaspoonful; rubbing her temples with it, wrapping her in the blankets; taking off her slippers, chafing her feet, while Walsh, quite nimbly and deftly, helped him on.

"The lady got belated, Walsh," Gratiot finally said; "her sister could not come. When a man's running away to get married he isn't always sure just how things may turn." He smiled a little as he spoke, while he went on chafing Lady Peggy's hands and feet.

"True enough, sir; marryin' ain't the easiest stunt in the world after all, and never will be as long as girls has got to be in it. She ain't comin' to just yet," he concluded oracularly; but then resumed: "Women folks, sometimes, when their Pas object to the feller, gets them streaks. Harry Payne hadn't any use for you, and it's too bad he hadn't; gettin' his daughter into a state like that. Wish Mis' Walsh was to home!" The hotel-keeper as he surveyed her appeared rather at his wits' end so far as the girl in the alcove was concerned.

80 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

Gratiot was now rubbing her ladyship's hands.
"Got any dry, thick clothes, Walsh?" he asked.
"Fetch them right away, please."

"Ain't got none for women. Mis' Walsh, she took all she had away with her; she's the only woman's ever here you know, Mr. Gratiot."

"Well," was the impatient retort, "haven't you got any dry duds of any sort, Walsh?"

Walsh pondered, and shook his head. "That pantry there's stacked full of uniforms; left-overs from the boys that's staggered in here to die after bein' stuck with Injuns' arrows. Mis' Walsh, she always kep' 'em; what for, I don't know. They're mostly full of moths."

"Damn it! Men's clothes are no use." He looked around the tawdry cheap room in despair and discouragement.

"Blankets is the best, Mr. Gratiot. She'll maybe," the shack-keeper again surveyed her prostrate ladyship, "pull through O.K. 'Pears to me like she was asleep for keeps though."

Gratiot fell to his knees, listening at her ladyship's heart.

"Is the Dominie here?" he jerked out tensely.

"Sure. Been sittin' up waitin' for the lady here, all day long," was the amiable response as Mr. Walsh, still staring at Lady Peggy, shook his grizzled head somewhat ominously.

"He isn't in bed, then?" Kent Gratiot's face was grave.

MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN 81

"He sure is; he ain't no night owl, 'ceptin' there's sickness 'round, or death," remarked Mr. Walsh in an appropriately gloomy tone.

"Wake him up and bring him here." It was said as if the command admitted of no time lost.

"Yes, sir." Walsh quitted the room.

When the man was alone with her, he said imploringly over the unconscious figure: "Peggy dear, we are to be really married, by a Dominie, an old friend of mine. Don't you hear me? My girl, who loved me all this while and borrowed the name she wanted!" He kissed her hands through the blankets. "Peg, you called Jack Churchill, back on the road there, when you couldn't understand that I was running away with you to be married. To have my name! our name! Won't you waken, dear? There, let me kiss your lids open." But her ladyship did not stir even so much as an eyelash. "Sleep on then, you're fagged to death. You'll be all right when you waken," but even as he uttered the words there came a chill at his heart-strings. What if —?

Then there was a knock. Gratiot sprang to his feet, drew the calico curtains close, and opened the door, his finger on his lips, and the Dominie came in; he was a thick-set short young man with the cherub face of an esthete and the fists of a bull-fighter.

The two shook hands as friends might who have a good, if superficial understanding and have

82 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

known each other for a long time, and who know only good of one another.

"Walsh has told you?" Kent Gratiot exclaimed.

The clergyman nodded as he answered: "Too bad, the poor child out on a night like this. Where is she? In Mrs. Walsh's room, I suppose?" His brilliant dark eyes glanced outside.

"She's there," Gratiot indicated the alcove.

"What can I do for you, Gratiot?" Forsythe spoke gently, but there was a purposefulness in his atmosphere that was to be reckoned with.

"Marry us of course," was the instantaneous rejoinder.

"Of course. I know all that; I got your letter, but that will be to-morrow." His manner was indicative of there being no appeal from his dictum. "Come over to my room with me," he added in a matter-of-course fashion.

"No, Dominie, not to-morrow, to-night," Gratiot's tone was to the full as indisputable as the priest's.

Their eyes encountered. That was all there was to it.

The Dominie spoke. "I will go and get my book and a witness."

"No witnesses." Gratiot's tone was imperative.

"But it is — necessary," the man of the cloth hesitated at the sill.

"Do you mean to tell me that if you were cast on a desert island alone, with one man and one girl, you couldn't marry them, because there was no other person there to see it?" Gratiot asked.

"I suppose I could," was the reply. "I'll fetch my book and put on my gown." Forsythe sighed as he went out.

"She will be awake when you get back." As Gratiot turned to the alcove, her ladyship with a scream of terror cried out, it would seem still in her sleep or swoon,

"Jack! Jack! Come, help me, come!"

CHAPTER VIII

In which Lady Peggy finds herself confronted with two simultaneous proposals; two pistols; and a marriage ceremony.

INSTANTLY Gratiot's hand was parting the calico curtains, when another hand was laid on his door knob. Someone opened, entered; Gratiot turned his head, gripped the calico together tighter; and said, eyeing the intruder unflinchingly,

"Well, Churchill, you've got me." His hand was stealing to his gun pocket as he added ironically, "perhaps."

"Put up your iron, Gratiot; I don't want you." The soldier-man shook his head as he spoke, advancing into the room a few steps too.

"This room is supposed to be my room." Kent Gratiot said it with indignant emphasis.

"Peggy called me. I've come," was the simple rejoinder.

"I see you've come. Now you can go," Kent's left hand indicated the exit.

"I'm here. She is somewhere here," the Captain went on implacably, with a seriousness that was boundless.

"Do you know you're talking to me about—my wife?" Gratiot's keen brains were already piecing out the tangle with the Dominie and the marriage ceremony to come.

"I don't care if she's your wife one thousand times over." He saw Gratiot's fingers itching over his gun stealthily, so he added, "None of that," as he quietly put his own weapon in evidence. Covering his man completely he went on: "Now, Gratiot, I don't move out of this, until I hear from her own lips that she doesn't need me. She's in this house. Where is she?" His voice was inflexible as the gods' voices may be when they intend to be heeded.

"Do you want to see her?" Gratiot inquired mockingly.

Churchill nodded, but his man was in his eye, and his eye was on his man, without relax or let up; gun up, thumb on trigger; patient, ready.

Gratiot parted the curtains.

The soldier-man, gun-hand steady, looked, and turned aside his head.

"I thought you wouldn't care to see her, after all." He pinned the calico together this time. "She's sleeping nicely."

Churchill said, "I'll wait"; he said it with such lack of heat or fervor or anger, that the other man regarded him for a moment in amazement, before he shouted out,

"No, you won't," and, with the motion of a

86 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

tiger, which is swifter than the motion of any man, he lifted his weapon. Churchill came straight to his opponent and put the steel up to Gratiot's forehead. Gratiot dropped his hand.

"Yes, I will, Mr. Gratiot. Sit down."

Gratiot sat down; Churchill took the chair on the opposite side of the little deal table. Each man's right hand, on his pistol, was on the table; each man's eyes, the one of the lynx, the other of the lion, were not for a second off guard. But they spoke on, while underneath there ran for each the thought of kill and conquer.

"You're the man that's been hunting me for two years, aren't you?" Kent Gratiot asked finally.

"I am."

"You know all?"

"I do."

"Then, why the devil don't you shoot me dead, or call in your men to take me to the bandage and the bullets?" His fingers trembled and the trembling maddened him; he remembered his throw.

"Because I promised her I wouldn't," was the answer spoken low.

"And she loved me so much that she asked you to let me slip?" Gratiot's eyes half turned toward the alcove, not quite — he had to recollect the other man's weapon. He had to remember that his will must bend, even if it would not break.

"Evidently." It was calmly said, without emphasis.

"And you cared enough about her to do it?" Gratiot stared at his companion.

"Quit your questioning." The soldier-man's eyes flashed dangerously.

"If you don't want me, and you can't have her, why don't you get out?" Gratiot leaned back just a trifle in his wooden chair, and looked curiously at Churchill.

"If I sit here till kingdom come, I'll not go — voluntarily — before I see her." The words came slowly, but they fell upon the ears of the listener like millstones, bound to find the bottom.

"She's mine," insolently it was said: insolent were the eyes that looked into the other man's eyes.

"I am aware of it, but I don't stir without hearing her speak." It was insolence for insolence if one chose to call it so.

Gratiot's face was livid.

"Look here," the Captain went on, "I heard the girl that's in there behind those curtains, call my name, call for help and —"

"When?" Gratiot interrupted, his breath coming thick and his pulses throbbing; he feared that death was lurking behind the curtain in that alcove; he was superstitious like all traitors, his lips narrowed and his eyes flared as he asked his question.

"Four hours ago," was the grave reply.

"Where were you?" Gratiot leaned nearer over the table.

"At Punty's"; he did not draw back as the other neared him across that table.

"Four hours ago we were miles from Punty's." Gratiot's hand shook, the great big drops started out at his forehead.

The Captain said, "If it were a million miles, I stop here just the same." He smiled a bit contemptuously at the shaking hand of his opponent.

Kent saw it. "You're bluffing! Damn you!" he cried out. "Playing this girl's voice-game until your men can reach and nab me." Churchill slowly shook his head. "But you don't do it." Then recklessly Gratiot made a back spring through the calico into the alcove and across, so that Lady Peggy lay between him and the Captain's gun.

But Churchill had not left his chair. He even smiled on, "I could pick the top of your head off now, if I saw fit;" his fine lips curled as his eyes took aim of the other man's height.

"I am a coward," Gratiot whispered, "of course I am! for her sake. You shoot if you dare. I'm picking her up and making off."

"No, you're not." Churchill was at him and had him, when Forsythe, in surplice and with book, walked peaceably in the door.

"The young lady is awake and ready?" His

deep voice was clerically adjusted to the time, the place, and the peculiar occasion; his spiritualized face was pallid with anxiety and zeal.

As Forsythe entered, however, her ladyship opened her eyes, raised her head, her hands and spoke,

“Let me go, please!”

It was but a whisper.

The three men heard it. Gratiot bent above her, his eyes on the soldier-man to be sure. Churchill stood still; the young priest said, looking at the Captain, “We shall have a witness after all, then?”

Her ladyship then sat up, the rough blankets fell from about her; her dark habit soaked, clung to her, its weight impeding her motions. Her eyes were half blinded by the smoky lamp, her senses were only just resuming their sway. She thought herself dreaming; and the two people she saw, Gratiot and Forsythe, the phantoms of her vision. Even the voices sounded weird to her, and it seemed impossible for her to at once recover her balance and determine her position.

Then Churchill, surveying the Dominie, asked, “A witness to what, sir?”

Gratiot, in a flash, taking every minutest circumstance into account, made his choice, and replied boldly, “This young lady’s marriage to me.”

At the same moment Lady Peggy, having gotten

the free use of herself, sprang up from the calico-decked bed, stood grasping the carved post, heard Churchill's question and spoke in the very breath with Gratiot, "Jack, Jack! you have come?"

The Captain made no reply. His eyes were on his man. Kent Gratiot, his fingers close on his gun, was also silent, but the young divine cheerily and, he thought, exactly to the point, said,

"Yes, dear young lady, and now that our friend has come to be the witness, everything can proceed in due reverence and order. I only wish it had been my privilege to have solemnized this ceremony before to-night."

Jack Churchill's gray eyes did not relax their grip one iota, but Jack Churchill's body swung around on Forsythe and his gun-free hand grabbed the Dominie's throat and held him down; as he acted, he spoke to her forlorn ladyship, she standing leaning against the post of the bedstead, distracted and utterly uncomprehending.

"Is not this man," Churchill inclined his head towards Gratiot, "your husband?"

"No," Lady Peggy said, quivering; all at once the monstrosity of her situation, the villainy of her lies, the horror of her behavior seemed bursting upon her returned faculties with a force that almost paralyzed her brain.

The Captain as he loosened his hold upon Forsythe's throat, said, "You go by his name?" He addressed her ladyship in a strange and com-

manding tone, a tone brooking no delay, including little of deference or convention.

"Yes," said Lady Peggy. "I have done so."

The imperious note in Churchill's voice called up her ladyship's own arrogance; forthwith she drooped no more, nor did she lean against the bed-post, but stood up straightly, her soggy skirts to the contrary notwithstanding; her realization of her wickedness notwithstanding; in short, in spite of everything, her ladyship made a gallant figure, and the fire shone in her blue eyes lambently, dauntlessly; she was of no mind whatever to burst into tears or to make a full confession. Not Lady Peggy de Bohun.

As soon as the words had escaped her lips assenting to the Captain's assertion, as to the name she bore, Gratiot triumphantly exclaimed, "He will be her husband in a few moments."

Her ladyship's smile came wanly as she put up her hand again and grasped the post.

"Lady Peggy and I," proceeded Kent Gratiot, "have known each other for years. We first met in South Africa; I have loved her for years." He laid his left hand on her ladyship's arm as he added, "Come, dear," nodding his head to the Dominie, who immediately started a preparatory but gentle cough.

Churchill spoke to her ladyship: "Is what Gratiot says true?"

Her ladyship, a species of defiance, a species

92 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

of heartbreak, it would seem too, to those versed in the ethics of her adorable sex, in her aspect, answered, "Every word of it." Then she picked Gratiot's left hand from her shoulder and laid it firmly away; then, her heart beat to suffocation; then, she would like to have jumped out of the window and broken her neck; then she thought death, of all estates, the finest; and no girl ever in so mad and sad a plight as hers; then also, she remembered her ancestress the first Lady Peggy who had indeed been plunged in miseries as frightful as her own. No, perhaps not quite.

Churchill, as she had spoken, laid his gun upon the table, handed the Dominie the prayer book he had caused him to drop, and indicated to Forsythe that he should go on.

"Now that things are adjusted, my dear young lady," Forsythe had been five years on the plains and was not unused to extraordinary weddings, "your Christian name is —?"

"Peggy," Gratiot answered for her. "Peggy and Kent." He put his own iron in his pocket as he turned his head toward the Captain, adding, "You will be our witness, after all, won't you, Captain Churchill?"

Jack replied, "Yes."

And Forsythe, his finger between the leaves of his book, with one final little cough was beginning, when her ladyship interrupted, speaking to, looking at, the soldier-man.

"Thank you, Captain Churchill, but your services will not be required. Nor yours," her ladyship turned to the Dominie; from him to Gratiot, as she then said clearly, and distinctly,

"I will not marry you, Mr. Gratiot."

"But," Gratiot whispered to her, "you must. You are compromised. You owe it to yourself — to me."

Churchill crossed over to the window.

Forsythe turned his back and also the leaves of his little book.

"I will not marry you," Lady Peggy's tone was cool, clear and without appeal.

The young priest heard it but, undeterred from what he esteemed duty, he came back to her and spoke with gentleness and respect:

"Dear young lady, be persuaded. We will not look back. We will only look forward. Surely, when the man you have loved well enough to bear his name, longs to make that name yours, you dare not refuse, or despise the plea." Her ladyship remained as ice, unflinching, untremulous; her gaze fixed, as in one last hopeless solicitation, on the face of the soldier-man. To him too the Dominie turned, saying, "Sir, I ask you to add your entreaties to Mr. Gratiot's and mine."

Her ladyship's eyes were like to fly out of her head in their intensity of anxiety, as she beheld Captain Churchill turn off across the room, speechless. As he said not a word, she breathed a quick

94 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

sigh, waving Forsythe, it would seem, out of her presence.

But Gratiot dashed over to the Captain and speaking low in his ear said, "You pretend to love this girl. If you do love her, you should love her good name better than life even. At a crisis like this, you can't love her and be silent." His words stung like the bite of an adder, through flesh and blood and bone and muscle, to the heart of the one he addressed.

Churchill looked him over, put him aside and went to Lady Peggy de Bohun.

"You have said 'no' to a marriage with this man. Will you say 'yes' to a marriage with me?" From his eyes there looked out the spirit of one who sees Death beckoning. "Your past is nothing to me." He spoke only so that she could hear, and his hands had hers their prisoners. "I don't care for anything except this; will you accept my name, me, my all, here, now; will you?"

Gratiot and Forsythe both waited; something in her ladyship's bearing, haughty, high, superb; something in the bearing of the soldier-man, elusive, savoring of finalities, held them both motionless, expectant, wondering, for they had not heard what Churchill said.

There was a little silence; so profound was it that all four noted the tin clock out in the shack kitchen ticking away and the cat purring there under the stove.

Then her ladyship, drawing away her hands from the fold of his, said,

"Have you all finished?" She glanced slowly at each of them. "Are you sure that you, sir," to the Dominie, "have nothing more to say?"

"Dear young lady," Forsythe answered, "I am ready to make you two," he turned towards Gratiot, "man and wife." There was a sort of solemnity in his voice, a gentleness, a lack of any emotion save the beneficence of holy church.

Her ladyship heard and felt all of this; but with wide eyes, she asked on quietly. "Did you ever see me before?"

"Never."

"Or hear of me?"

"Only as the young lady to whom Mr. Gratiot wished me to marry him."

"You don't even know my last name, or my estate in life?"

Forsythe was about to answer her, when Gratiot spoke quickly, "The Dominie knows of you, dear, under another name than your own."

"Yes," assented Forsythe quickly, "the name of Payne."

CHAPTER IX

In which her ladyship sends away the Captain, and the spy, with a gun; and finds herself alone in a dismal shack

THEN indeed her ladyship's eyes flashed as the gun flashes in the sunlight, and she saw the face of the soldier-man distorted with a spasm of grief.

What may not speed through the human brain abreast? Not two thoughts only, but four, five, a dozen; each clean cut, sharp, poignant, exact. In such a second her ladyship saw clearly why the Dominie was so aptly there; what Gratiot's scheme had been, still was; what Churchill must think, when still another name was exhibited for him to believe her as masquerading under.

Did he believe it?

Her ladyship, had she been the man, she swore in the depths of her soul, would have then and there proclaimed her utter disbelief in the whole miserable story, incontrovertible though it seemed; would have seized the girl and borne her off triumphantly, despite thirty thousand others laying claim.

But her ladyship not being the man, and but a man being the him of it, could not find it in her

composition to brook the discredit of the Captain's credence.

By a few words of confession, she could, then and there, have blazed the path of peace, and very like of happiness.

But not her ladyship! Oh, no.

If he could believe these things of her — he should; and there was an end of that. She removed her gaze from him back to Forsythe, saying, " You don't know whether I am wife, widow, or what? "

" No, I do not," the young priest admitted ruefully.

" I might not be free to marry? " Her ladyship did indeed glance sideways at the Captain; he stood at the window, his gaze upon the ground. Gratiot kept close to Lady Peggy.

" I rely upon Mr. Gratiot for that, of course. I have known Mr. Gratiot for some time," was Forsythe's guarded rejoinder.

" Have you? But not me. You have never even seen me before, and yet you are willing to come here in the night and make a marriage between me and this man. You have taken no time, no trouble, to find out anything about me; because this man hints to you that there should be a marriage between him and me," her ladyship's voice fell to the lowest, and it is but just to say that the recollection of her plucky ancestress was at the bottom of her prowess as she went on. " Be-

98 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

cause you find me here you assume my necessities. You take your fellow man's word for it, and, without even the benefit of one doubt, you urge the bonds of marriage upon me."

Forsythe leaned far toward her, his soul expectant of her making her position clear and defined; Lady Peggy paid little heed to him, her veiled eyes did seek another face, on which she beheld written an inquiry identical with the Dominie's!

Did it cause her to alter her course?

Not a whit, but the rather made her persist in sticking to her colors.

She! Lady Peggy de Bohun explain? Not at all. If he could think thus and so, then he must. All their three expectations got was this. "Even if you have a doubt, I don't evade it, nor will I dispel it. Please to go away," she indicated the door in an irresistible fashion, and the Dominie wisely went.

Then Lady Peggy, turning two eyes as full of bitterness as a girl's eyes could be upon the Captain, asked him, "Have you anything to say to me, Captain Churchill?"

The soldier-man slipped a ring from his finger and held it before her eyes, and toward her hold. "Nothing but this," he said brokenly; "it was my mother's wedding ring."

And Gratiot had the grit and the sense to turn away towards that little twelve-paned window; maybe he laughed to himself as he did so;

MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN 99

Gratiot was congratulating himself; he experienced an insensate and curious buoyancy; he regarded Churchill as the under dog; he felt that his time was coming sure, in spite of the whole chain of events. And he felt secure of his life which was to be accurate, no small thing.

Lady Peggy shook her head and drew back. "It is chivalrous of you to offer what you do, Captain Churchill. I appreciate the benevolence, and thank you for it. Also, I ask you to leave here." She stood very proudly away from him.

Churchill followed close to her, looked into her level, beautiful eyes, as she placed one hand upon the table.

"You ask me to leave you alone with Kent Gratiot?" he whispered.

"Yes," she made answer under her breath. "I do."

The Captain said nothing, but he noiselessly took his pistol from the table and tendered it to her ladyship.

Not even so much would she concede.

She smiled a bit disdainfully, refusing the gun.

"Peggy, Peggy!" he murmured, his eyes in hers as he laid the iron down again and turned up to the door.

"Good-by, Captain Churchill," said she, still game and unflinching.

He looked at her and was gone.

Gratiot heard the hinges creak and came to her

ladyship, but not as close as he had expected to come.

"Well, Mr. Gratiot, what have you gained?" Peggy, as aloof from him as if miles separated them, put her query coolly, so far as outward aspect went.

"You, you, you," he cried it savagely, but since something in, or about her, kept his arms at bay, he sank upon a chair, leaned his elbows on the table, his chin in his palms and regarded her ladyship hungrily.

"Me?" she smiled a little.

Gratiot, not stirring from his seat, leaned a bit and blew out the smoky lamp. For an instant it was black darkness for them, then both beheld the gray rim at the horizon turning white, yellow even, faint harbinger of a possible golden dawn, for all the rain that still was pelting down.

"Yes, you," Gratiot spoke quietly enough now. "Don't you suppose I understand? A woman's way is past finding out when she loves a man. You refused to let the Dominie marry us; sent him off. You refused Churchill," laughing grimly. "You stopped with me." He got up then. "Peg, you love me; you are mine. Come here and tell me so." His hand gripped the table edge, almost touching the pistol the Captain had left, but he took no step nearer to my Lady Peggy.

MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN 101

Her ladyship however took a step toward him, and said, "I do not love you. I am not yours."

"Why did you stop here with me, then?" he asked hoarsely.

"Because I chose to," her reply came slowly, and most distinctly.

"I have loved you since the first moment I saw you," his soul reached out to her in his voice, but yet he stood still.

"Love!" she echoed. "You have done your level worst for me." There was almost a sob in her throat then.

"Peggy!" She glanced at him in response. "Aren't you afraid?" Gratiot's voice was the shadow of a whisper as he said these words.

"Of what?" Her ladyship's eyes, wide as a child's, met his.

"Of me. We are alone together in this house. The Dominie has gone. Walsh has gone. I sent him to the round-up with the Barkeep." Kent Gratiot took one, just one step closer to the girl, and although he offered her, as yet, no touch, the intention was as palpable as a fact.

She said, "I am afraid of nothing."

"Peggy!" Then Gratiot's arms went out, as the gray line in the east silvered, as the morning woke up that half of the world.

"Stand away," her right hand went up.

"Don't fire for God's sake!" he cried.

"I have no gun." She held both palms open for him to see.

"Then you are mine!" There was the far reach and the near reach in his movement and his voice.

He was beside her, when she saw the Captain's pistol; time enough to reach behind Gratiot and snatch it, which she did.

But she did not show Gratiot the gun.

Something else held him at bay.

Something Lady Peggy had, by inheritance, from the people of her blood, the gallant cavaliers, the honorable ladies.

"Mr. Gratiot," she said, "I refused to tell you why I stopped here. It is my affair. You have no part in it. You say you have sent everyone out of the house?"

"Yes. I have. We're alone, Peg." His fingers twitched but they were empty.

"Now I send you," her ladyship spoke conclusively.

"When I go I take you with me!" His touch was almost, not quite, on her arm.

"No, you won't. You won't touch me. I borrowed your name. I have paid for the loan. I have given you your life. Go and keep it."

"Churchill will get me." He smiled but terror was in his soul; he fancied the soldier-man ambushed outside awaiting him.

"Captain Churchill gave me his word you should not be taken. I gave my word to Florida Payne that you should not be taken. We both will keep our words, if it costs us our lives."

"Florida Payne be damned!"

Then Gratiot touched her ladyship's arm fiercely; then her ladyship raised the Captain's gun and touched it to Gratiot's cheek.

"Go," she said, jumping back and covering him with the adroitness of keen imagination, marvelous wit and nerve.

Slowly backing, his starved eyes fixed upon her face, Gratiot got himself to the door, the entry, the steps, the yard; the pouring torrent was now hurrying up from the east with redoubled fury; there were vivid flashes; there was thunder's roar; her ladyship followed Gratiot steadily, with Churchill's iron up, her finger on the trigger.

Out into the yard, across to the stable where her own two ponies were the sole well-fed tenants: Gratiot leaped up on one animal, cunningly seized the bridle of the other; and, her ladyship still covering him unflinchingly, he sang out as he dashed from the yard, "So long, Lady Peggy! You're tied up where you are. I'm taking both your beasts, and Walsh won't be home till next week." His laugh came back to her as she stood there, gun still up, fearing foul play, drenched anew; the silver horizon rim was again swallowed up in the gray and phantasmal dawning that her

dim eyes were searching for the Captain's possible return.

As the splash of hoofs in the puddles died, as the wind woke up, more boisterous than yesterday; as the cat, arching her back, appeared on the kitchen stoop, and meowed, Lady Peggy dropped her right arm and turned in.

She was sure now that Gratiot would not come back. Life was as dear to him as to another. Even lacking her ladyship's affection, she recalled that many men had still lived on. But, once inside the Gathrie shack, she fastened its doors and its six ground-floor windows as well as she could, considering the absence of bolts or keys, and the sole reliance being sticks of wood.

She was alone.

So much to the good of it all.

She had kept her word to the forlorn girl at Punty's.

She had held faith with herself, her own pride, her own miserable masquerading, in the face of the man she loved. And he? He above all others had believed her culpable! Her ladyship, sitting on one of the broken-backed chairs in the kitchen, with the clock now stopped, and the cat rubbing against her bedraggled skirts, begging for breakfast, had like to burst into a flood of tears.

But she didn't.

CHAPTER X

In which her ladyship springs as bravely into trousers as did the first Lady Peggy into breeches, just in time to hear the "hello" of arriving men

Puss jumped up in her ladyship's lap and purred.

Her ladyship forthwith, the cat in her arms, went a-prospecting. Her alert, rapid mind took in that here she must stop until the tempest stopped. Tempests thereabout were in the habit of lasting for days. The outlook was not encouraging, yet to Peggy de Bohun it had its savor, the point of which was that the actual physical circumstances prevented her from dwelling solely on Jack Churchill.

Walsh's shack was a "hotel"; quite as much of one as Punty's; indeed, its red and blue sign swung over the arbor in the yard proclaiming its quality. People might come before her ladyship (it must be afoot, since Gratiot had slyly taken both her ponies) could leave. To plow through a storm like this in velvet slippers would be not only madness, but impossible.

Was there any food?

Yes, in the ice-box and the wire safe there

likely was; also drink in the bar, across the entry. Very strong drink, and plenty of it, and tobacco.

The sight of the bottles and demijohns and so forth, urged upon my Lady Peggy's mind the fact that if anyone did arrive, at Walsh's hotel, it would certainly be men! Women were at a premium out yonder, and seldom ventured without an armed escort in their infrequent journeyings.

What sort of men would be those who would seek shelter at Walsh's?

Her ladyship knew very well the species that arrived at Punty's: she had heard their conversation frequently, and had entertained herself by picturing Bandy Bergh, Hammond, Sterling, and the rest, laughing over the imitations she might one day give them of these cardmen of the West.

If men,— her ladyship, as she faced this proposition, let the cat slip to the floor with a bounce,— and she a woman alone! what then?

She must get away; danger was here, therefore to flee was her only course.

She went to the window, then to the door to see what the weather was like.

Her ladyship had too level a head not at once to dismiss leaving the place in such a tempest as then raged.

Very well, it was to stop; so be it. If men came, she would assume to be Walsh's cousin, or sister, or sister-in-law, keeping house in his absence.

Then as to clothes? Her ladyship glanced over her damp, mud-spattered outfit.

Mrs. Walsh must have clothes? of course! Equally of course there was a Mrs. Walsh. All the hotel men yonder have wives.

Her ladyship picked up the cat again for companionship and flew up the stairs; in and out both above, and later below, of every room and pantry there was.

Mrs. Walsh had left exactly one collar and one pink bow behind her. Not another shred? Yes: a pair of stout knitted woolen stockings rolled up in a ball on top of the three-legged bureau.

They were ten sizes too large for Lady Peggy, but they were dry and she put them on.

There was a fire in the stove: there was plenty of wood in the shed. She could put off her own garments, hang them to dry, and resume them, probably, before anyone could arrive.

So she took off her skirt, jacket and petticoats and spread them on the wooden horse. She fed puss some scraps of bacon; ate some herself and a bit of bread she found in a tin box, drank some water from the cooler, and then again flew up to hunt once more, lest she should have missed some spot where woman's clothes might be hidden.

No, there were none. Every drawer and shelf was bare.

Both puss and Peggy had but a fruitless quest. Then she came last into the room where Kent

108 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

Gratiot had fetched her, and for a second time went peering in the pantry. It was empty. Stop! Was not that a pile of goods stacked in a far dark corner?

The pussy cat jumped a-top of it, softly pawing a nest for herself as is the way of cats.

Lady Peggy ran after her, knelt down, and felt the huge pile. It was cloth! Wool cloth! She dragged it to the light by the window, untied the rope that bound it, and there fell asunder such a collection of soldier trousers, caps, jackets and the like, of all sizes, as caused her ladyship, and the cat, for the dust that flew out of them into their eyes and the moth-millers that also flew out of them, to sneeze and cough, and to jump down into the kitchen for the broom.

With this weapon, the cat catching at the millers for play, her ladyship swept and beat and brushed the assortment, the while her brains busied themselves concocting a plan.

How?

It is to be confessed that as her ladyship, who had never handled a broom before in her life, was wielding this domestic implement with heartiest will, swinging her lithe arms over a certain pair of blue trousers, a certain small-sized jacket, the chain about her neck snapped short, catching on the broom-handle, and the miniature of her ladyship's beautiful great, great, great, grandmother, Lady Peggy Burgoyne, fell to the floor. Her

ladyship just caught it away from the paws of the cat, and as she looked at the blue eyes, the smiling lips, the dimples, the witcheries, curves and coynesses of her progenitor's portrait, there sprang into her own recollection the time when Lady Peggy the first had sprung valiantly into breeches and man's estate!

Lady Peggy de Bohun of the U. S. A. (through her mother, an American girl) was no whit behind her ancestress in directness of purpose and action; none the less adroit and ready in making up her mind, nor in a certain devil-may-care courage, which most feminine women lack. Her ladyship would sooner have died than have voted, but her ladyship then and there, with puss for sole witness, determined on getting into man's clothes, because she saw with clear and cognizant vision that as she was placed and likely to be placed for a few days to come maybe, man's estate was best, and the disguising of her own identity the wisest plan she could adopt.

So, first running down and whipping her petticoats, jacket and hat from the horse and hiding them, wrapped up in a flour sack, in the convenient ice-box, her ladyship rushed up again and without any more ado put her slim self into the habiliments of some poor lad or other who had come his last cropper by way of a Mexican bullet. So much was certain by the round, clean-cut hole in the left side of the jacket, which Lady Peggy set

110 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

down in her ignorance to the charge of cigars or matches.

Once inside the blue-cloth things, her ladyship took a view of herself in the tiny mirror, having chosen a cap from the lot that she knew would fit; she was setting this on her head, when, lo! in the glass her ladyship was forced to observe that her hair was not of the regulation masculine length, but the rather in two stout braids wound about her head. She set the cap on, and could not but realize that she made a fairly fetching boy as it concealed her braids entirely. But she could not wear the cap forever? Certainly not. Should men come, the cap must be, or might have to be, taken off. What had her great, great, etc., grandmother done? Peg was urged to further remembrance of her ancestress by at this moment putting her miniature, together with her own buck-skin bag of diamonds (which she habitually wore inside her gown, much to her aunt's discouragement) into her trousers pocket.

The first Lady Peggy had cut off her tresses. In whose cause had she cut them off? Her lover's. And should it be that this twentieth-century Peg would do less? Never. Was she not engulfed in all this vile business on account of one who had loved her, whom she loved? Was it not her hope to get out of the punishments, which were her just dues, it is true, and in some as yet unfathomed fashion some day, behold Captain

Churchill again? Lady Peg, in her imagination, beheld him on his knees of course, begging her forgiveness for his wicked credence of Gratiot's imputations.

Where were the scissors? Up and down ran her ladyship, puss scampering in her wake. Scissors! Scissors! None to be found. She would try a knife then. All dull as hoes at the business of cutting off a girl's hair; much more accustomed to bacon and corn-bread.

Up she went again through the rooms; she espied a basket! here were spools, needles, a bodkin, and yes, scissors! at last! Her ladyship returned to the one mirror the hotel boasted, and proceeded without a single qualm to snip off square and short the lengths of her beautiful dark hair; to clip and trim the remaining curly mop into the presentable semblance of the average masculine head; to tightly braid and coil the havoc, and pin it up in an old newspaper, and then to clap it into the inside pocket of her lately acquired jacket. Her ladyship had no mind to lose forever the tresses that had been her joy and pride. She recalled that puffs could be made and pinned on. As she again set the cap upon her shorn head, the morning's light, even through the blind of the tireless storm, caught at her hands and at the dozen of splendid rings adorning them. She had forgotten them.

Her ladyship took them off, tore a strip from

112 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

one of the sheets, strung them on it, tied the ends, and put these also into her trousers pocket. Money she had fetched none, but her ladyship's clear head, foreseeing a possible need of it, was careful to secure the therewithal. Then she beheld the Captain's pistol and put it carefully into her pocket as well.

A horse she must eventually have, and Peg's sole reliance now was in the chance traveler from whom she could buy a beast, and pay in jewels: this would not be unusual out yonder, nor would the coin be questioned; although it would undoubtedly be set down as loot.

By this time it was ten o'clock; the clock upstairs told that. She ran down and set the kitchen one to match it, put fresh wood on the stove; she broomed up the kitchen floor, she filled the kettle, and she found the coffee-bag, the butter pot, the flour. Alas! what for? Her ladyship could neither bake nor brew. She discovered the oil-can, too! to be sure. She filled the lamps, recklessly and unknowing, at the forbidden places. With an instinct for order, she even went into the bar, straightened the bottles in rows and the mugs and glasses, also the boxes of cigars and cigarettes and the tawdry prints upon the walls.

Then back again she went to the kitchen, searching the ice-box, and the wire safe. Her ladyship found potatoes, cabbages, turnips, canned

plums and spinach, canned salmon and canned milk.

My Lady Peggy craved the food but my Lady Peggy did not know, even the A of it, how to cook: she had never been in a kitchen before in her life. As to opening these cans — her ladyship toiled, but in vain! and was finally obliged to content herself with the stale bread and left-over bacon and her own weird decoction of coffee *sans* milk.

Being hungry she certainly ate. So did the cat, sitting on the kitchen table beside the dish of bacon, purring, at one o'clock when the meal was served.

Lady Peg sat at that table with the cat for one hour, two hours, three, four; then she rose up to look for a book maybe? anything to distract her mind until the storm lulled or the traveler arrived.

There were no books; Walsh's hotel did not run to literature, save of the light and airy variety known as showbills, a few of which adorned the bar walls.

It poured on, and then the twilight began. The night itself would soon be down. Her ladyship was afraid of both night and darkness, but she took heart of grace and began a solitary pacing of the entry, after having lighted the two lamps. She glanced down at her feet. Velvet slippers! Her ladyship burst into a fit of laughter, even

through the mad thoughts which she had been entertaining of Jack Churchill.

Puss and she ran once more up the stairs to the pantry of the pile; there were shoes there, certainly; she remembered having seen rows of them, uncouth great leathers rusty with mud and mold.

Her ladyship looked them all over, chose the least big, and slipped her small feet gladly, unwittingly, into dead men's shoes; as she laced them, such was the beating of her heart, such the power of her remembrance of the Captain, that she determined to stop at Walsh's no longer, not five minutes, but to start off a-foot, and by dint of her strength and purpose gain Punty's some way or other.

She stooped down to pat the cat, and she placed the remainders of bacon and bread where it could reach them; she crossed the entry, one hand was upon the billet of wood that was doing duty for a barrier, the other she thrust into her trousers pocket to make sure of her treasures, when there came a splash of hoofs in the pools, the call of voices in the gloaming, the "Hello! Hello!" of a cheerful masculinity. Tramp, tramp on the doorstep, bang rat-a tat-tat!! on the door itself, then a withdrawal off to the stable with laughter and chatter and more "Hello-hello's!"

CHAPTER XI

In which my Lady Peggy as a Barkeep makes the acquaintance of the Tucson Terror and is annexed by that gentleman

PEG drew back the wooden bar. She asked herself, should she fly? Should she not? These men had horses; she might borrow, beg, buy one, if she dared let them see her jewels. Heaven knew what manner of men they might be, and yet many a ranchman was not a gambler nor a thief. But a horse she must have, and so to reach Punty's, her aunt, safety, and, mayhap, the Captain a-thinking of her still. Yet her ladyship was almost sinking on her knees, almost ready to implore help of these as yet unseen strangers, and give up her disguise; for after all, she was as far from being the defeminized woman as was her namesake of long ago. Peg, it is not too much to say, would have vastly preferred bursting into tears, proclaiming her sex, and claiming the protection she sorely wanted; but abreast of all this there was in her composition the self-reliant defiance, the haughty spirit, the noble consciousness of her own wrongdoing, and

the acknowledgment that this present environment was but just dues for grievous misdeeds.

Perhaps Lady Peggy's pride was the strongest element in her; at all events, to strike her flag and yield up her secret, and her sword, seemed to her impossible. It had not perforce taken her many seconds to balance conditions, reach her conclusions, and prepare, in so far as she could, for the encounter that was so surely at hand.

Almost stumbling over the cat, who set up a frightful wail as her ladyship's stout shoe came down upon its tail, she crossed to the kitchen, and soaked her face in the muddy remains of the horrible coffee she had brewed in the morning, holding her visage to the hot stove in order to dry the color well in; she rubbed her finger in the smoky lamp chimney, and this into her own arched and handsome brows, taking care to leave enough on her hands to render them as unlike what woman's hands should be as possible.

She held up Mrs. Walsh's evidently new dishpan to get the effect, but it was so distorted, her ladyship let it down with a rattle, hurried back to the barroom, and, at that precise instant —

“Hello! hello! Walsh! Hello!” rang blithely, if irritatedly again, from without; then the door swung open, and they came in; half a dozen of the choicest tricksters that ever handled two packs of cards at once, or fled across the border with unrighteously acquired horse-flesh.

The six of them rostered into the bar, as if apparently well acquainted with its *locale* and atmosphere.

The leader, however, halted at the threshold, he couldn't have told why, as he merely beheld a sooty-faced lad sitting back in a tilted chair, with his feet up on one of the iron tables.

Her ladyship nodded to him laconically; her heart was throbbing to burst, but she was more than thankful that over that heart of hers was buttoned the jacket of man and not the bodice of girl, in a leisurely way, while she had these unleisurely thoughts, she took in the calibre of the new arrivals.

"Where's Walsh?" The leader asked this as if nettled and also annoyed at the nonchalance of the lad in the tilted chair.

"Gone to the round-up," her ladyship replied, in a tone that was well in character with her garments.

"Where's Finnerty?" the leader asked with increasing irritability.

"The same," she risked it, and she did not stir from the tilted chair. Who, to her, was "Finnerty?"

"Who are you — the new Barkeep?" No one but the leader had spoken so far; they didn't know it, but that lithe, lazing figure held them quiet.

Her ladyship was like to go into a fit as it

118 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

flashed upon her to fancy her adorers as audience to this query; she answered, "Seem to be."

"You're a cool kid," remarked the Second in command.

"It's a cool evening," was her ladyship's rejoinder.

"Get up and give us something hot, then!" The Second in command was loudly endorsed on this score.

Lady Peggy got up from the tilted chair, shaking as she did so, and went behind the counter.

"Scotch or Irish?" she demanded, wiping out a half-dozen glasses with the towel that hung conveniently on its peg.

"How do you know it won't be champagne, young tenderfoot?" was queried by the smallest man of the lot.

Her ladyship surveyed the group. "I ain't sure, sir, but you all size up to me like whisky straight," she answered promptly.

Everyone of them laughed; they had seemed dull and lacking in talk before, but her ladyship set the pace. She was planning to buy a horse.

The leader then remarked, jocosely nudging his nearest neighbor, "Kid's knowin' some, ain't he?"

The neighbor nodded assent, growling back. "Curse the luck back there at Fort McHenry! Them starry-barry chaps is gettin' to know too

much. No money in 'em any more." He looked downhearted. Peg saw and heard. She was reassured; she would be able to buy the horse.

"Fort McHenry!" Her ladyship nearly overfilled her sixth tumbler as she heard those words. She pushed the liquor along the counter in a row, to each man his own.

"Come on, kid!" cried the Second, tapping his glass invitingly.

Lady Peggy shook her head slowly.

"Say, you must, you know," the leader remarked warningly.

Again her ladyship shook her head. "Never touch it," she remarked in a contemptuous fashion.

"Got to begin, then. You're old enough to learn how. Ain't he, boys?" The leader's fist came down decisively on the counter.

"Sure! sure! Pour out a full one. Give it to him! Make him pour it himself. Kids has to be taught!" The little room rang with oaths and mirth.

Did her ladyship flinch?

Not she.

Did she pour?

Not she.

"Pour, I say!" yelled the leader and his men.

Now, what did Lady Peggy de Bohun know of the ways of thieves and gamblers? What acquaintance could she have had with the jargon or

standards of men like these? It's this way, there's no gainsaying it.

There are people who travel the world over and see nothing of the world's life; there are other people who travel up and down a big city in an L train, and behold, take in, pulsate with, the innermost secrets of the existence of the tenements, whose vision is as clear for the underworld as for their own upper portion, whose brains understand; that's it, "understand," that humanity, for all its phases, jargons, crimes and cultures, is the same old humanity after all, and that if one dares to speak its own dialect, one will be understood too.

Lady Peggy dared. Not the daring of the mad man-women of to-day, but the daring of the womanly women of yesterday and to-morrow.

"Ain't going to pour," she said laconically.

"You know who you're talkin' to?" inquired the Second in command, jerking his thumb towards the leader.

"A man," responded Peg, jerking her own blackened thumb in the same direction.

"Look here now, young one, you just pour and gulp it down quick, you hear?" This was said somewhat threateningly too, by the leader.

"He's," the Second in command said to her with bulging eyes at his chief, "the Tucson Terror, Billy Birdsong," much in the tone one might

use in introducing an anaconda outside its cage to a room full of people.

"He may be the whole U. S. A. Terror for all I care," remarked her ladyship. "I ain't going to pour, nor drink." She leaned on a hogshead back of the bar and surveyed the group.

"Say, what are you anyway?"

It was the leader who spoke, as he sized up the slender boy who stood his ground without a tremor.

"Barkeep."

"Make him drink the stuff!" the rest of them yelled. "Pour it down his throat. We'll hold him!" They all made a rush for Peggy.

"Hands off!" shouted Bill Birdsong, the Tucson Terror. "You leave this here kid to me." They fell back. "You never heard of me before, eh?" he spoke cynically to her motionless ladyship.

Her ladyship shook her head, very slowly, very appraisingly.

"Where in hell have you been then, and what perfession have you been occupied with, may I ask?" was the next question put, and it was put with uncompromising sincerity.

"None of your business," was the curt response.

"Ain't it? Well, now, I can tell you what you are, plumb sure. You're an Escape. A deserter

from the Army." He spoke in a tone of righteous triumph. "Look at that uniform! look at them shoes! eh, boys?" Then he turned back to Peg. "You been over the border in Mexique? you found the weather too warm over there for you and you got back, eh?"

Her ladyship did not answer.

"Anyhow," proceeded Mr. Birdsong, "I ain't goin' to do nothin' to you, kid; you kind o' please me; you got grit. But there ain't no use in denyin' things. Outlaw's writ all over your hull make-up."

At this point her ladyship was very near falling down, so great was the quaking of her knees, so vast her recognition of the truth of the statement made.

"Look up!" yelled the Tucson Terror. And Peggy looked up. "You don't dare say, in the teeth of these gentlemen friends of mine, that you are anything else but one of us? now, do you?"

Lady Peggy smiled. Then she inquired with apparent calmness, "Just how do you figure that out, pard?" She was quaking, but she was bent upon holding her own.

"You young rascalion! Which are you, a horse thief, a murderer, a deserter, or a—" Billy drew a pack of cards from his pocket, and with one dexterous fillip threw them into a letter "G" on the counter. "Gambler? eh? out with

it. We're all pals here, and I'd like to have as slick and brassy a young one as you are in my bunch. What's your record?"

All the others bent forward to hear.

Her ladyship opened her lips, but before she could speak the Second in command shouted wildly, imperatively, "Hold on, seven to ten, it's murder!" The instinct to take a gamble on anything in earth, sky above or water beneath, was as the breath of life to every man of them.

"Taken!" yelled another.

"Five to twenty, it's desertin' the Army!" sang out a third.

"Nothin' doin'," was the rejoinder from the fourth, who surlily added, "That kid ain't no real soldier, he's just borriied them duds; eh, kid, ain't you?"

Her ladyship inclined her head; in point of fact her tongue now refused to do its duty. Had this man discerned that she was not a man?

"Fifteen to twenty," bawled the Terror, whose hand was in the air, "it's horse-stealin', eh? speak up! Or tricks with the aces, clubs and spades?" Her ladyship breathed freer. No one had observed the surly one's remarks on borrowed clothes.

"I ain't no soldier," she said, "nor no murderer, nor no gambler to speak of"—her ladyship recalled bridge at so many boxes of Huyler's

a game—"nor no horsethief, but—" Lady Peggy halted, and the ghost of a smile, quizzical and suggestive, hovered on her lips.

"You don't look just like what we'd figgered out for a angel," Billy Birdsong put in. "Now, kid, you can't come that over us. What is your line of work? Scuttlin' ships, wreckin' auto cars for the loot, or banks for the same? Or forgery, eh?"

"He looks like forgery!" the Second in command exclaimed delightedly; the gang had lately lost its penman.

"A thousand to one it's forgery!" screamed two of the company at once.

"Hold on, there!" the leader spoke authoritatively. "Pitch it out, kid. All's on the square here. They ain't one of us six that haven't sent his man to a better place, or crossed the border on horse-flesh that wasn't paid for, or made hisself acquainted with fool men's money by way of a double deck of cards. Don't be afraid," he added reassuringly.

"Two thousand to one on—" It was the surly man who attempted this motion.

"Shut up!" The Terror banged his hand down on the counter. "I believe this kid's afraid." Her ladyship inwardly agreed. "No-body'll nab you, son, 's long as Billy Birdsong's on top of the grass."

Her ladyship paled even under the coffee.

Should she agree to forgery and so find the road to the horse she coveted?

"It's forgery sure," winked the Second. "Two thousand, Billy, to the horse you got last night from them tourists, it's the pen, what's mightier than the sword, what's fetched our kid to his present persition."

They waited, not one of the crowd raised his glass to his lips; there was a bit of tension for them and a very big quantity of the same commodity for her ladyship. Presently she said, speaking slowly,

"It ain't forgery." She instinctively felt that some species of wrongdoing was, here, her only passport, and of wrongdoing she adjudged herself most culpable, therefore she could tacitly compound with at least some species of felony.

"What is it, then?" snapped the Second.

"Guess you might call it lyin'," Lady Peggy spoke in a measured way.

A wild guffaw greeted this announcement.

"You ought to be wearin' wings, sonny." The Second had the floor. "Lyi'n's the or'inary of perlite conversation in all quarters of society. You ain't wearin' them feathers yet. No, sir." Then the Second made a pause. "It's murder. That's what it is. Why," reproachfully was it said, "don't you know this crowd'd only think the more of you, if you've put a hole in your enemy or sent the Devil a new

man?" He was closely eying Peggy's quivering face.

"But I ain't! I've been wicked, and bad, and horrible."

"Well, there, then, that's O. K.," soothed the Terror. "You're our kind. Now, can you ride a horse?" The tone was incisive, clean-cut, full of business intent.

"Try me!" Her ladyship's tone was so joyous, buoyant, frank and free, that her companions exchanged glances of congratulation on the spot.

"You ain't never taken a horse what didn't belong to you, perhaps?" remarked Mr. Birdsong pleasantly.

"Never. But I'd like to," her ladyship replied with vim.

"Your hand on that." The rough hairy paw of the Terror was extended, and into it my Lady Peggy laid her grimy, strong, small hand.

"That settles that, then," remarked the Second. "We've always been needin' a slight-built kid with takin' ways, to snaffle the horse of real value."

"But I ain't goin' to drink," said her ladyship, folding up her arms across the borrowed jacket most conclusively.

"Not until you want to," the Terror easily agreed. "Maybe not then, son, because in this line of business of ours, preëmptin' blooded horses and gettin' 'em across into dear old Mexique, the less liquor you carry on the saddle the better."

Her ladyship nodded; all the while she was forming plans of how she would dare appropriate and make off, the very first chance she got, on one of the horses now safely stabled across the yard.

" You see," Mr. Birdsong proceeded airily, " we have our eyes on a certain party what's tourin' 'round, up and down, nobody knows just what for! They've got a car, and an aëroplane, down a dozen miles from here, at Catspaw Junction, and they've got horses!" The Terror whistled his admiration. " We slicked away with one of 'em, the dandy of the string, day before yesterday. They're not on to us, not one little bit, oh, no; we took care to leave a piece of a uniform like yours stuck on to a nail in the barn door, and likewise a pink riband we found. And, see? we always carry with us for ballast," he laughed like the rogue he was, " a pair of very small weighted shoes, lettin' 'em pound the soil pretty well just near the corral we pinch."

" Besides," the Second now took up the Terror's thread, " this time, soon as we'd nabbed the loot, we struck it straight, four of us, for Fort McHenry; the other two kept going north with the beast; then, when the storm broke, it was plain sailin' enough to strike it south for Walsh's here. No tracks in a tempest like this."

It was still raging noisily and all eyes turned to the calicoed window, where puss sat on the sill cleaning her fur.

128 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"No, none," assented her ladyship. "Say, pards, what's goin' on at the Fort?" she spoke with just the right amount of interest, but everyone of them noted that it was the first question the Barkeep had asked. As she spoke, she filled the glasses that had been pushed to her, again and again.

"Same old di-dos. We hit some of the boys for a few pesos, but the Colonel of the 42nd is a sharp sort; he didn't spot us for our worth, though, but we just thought we'd best git out while he had the idea we was tourists lookin' for fun."

"They got that spy though, O.K.," said a man who had picked up the pack the Terror had thrown down, and he now was at monte, on the floor, with his pals.

"What spy?" Peggy's heart stood still.

CHAPTER XII

In which Mr. Billy Birdsong assures Lady Peggy of his protection, and wherein Lady Peggy sees a face at the pane.

HAD Gratiot then been caught, and were all her pains, humiliations, this present one worst of all, for nothing? Was Florida Payne to find that her ladyship had not only wronged her unconsciously but also proven unable to keep her word?

"Chap that's been pinchin' fortification plans and sellin' 'em to the Japs," rejoined the three-card monte man jauntily; "that's a nice tony kind of a job now!"

"Oh," she made her tone one of relief, but added, rather disinterestedly, "What was his name?"

"Believe he was an officer, Captain Something."

"No!" exclaimed another; "he wasn't no officer at all."

"All wrong!" chimed in another querulously. "They didn't snare the game at all. The game's went away with a girl; his wife, I think they said."

"Yes, they did get the spy too," Mr. Birdsong muttered between his bets on the three-card game on the sandy floor.

"Get him!" Her ladyship let the words escape unconsciously.

Billy Birdsong turned quickly to her, neglecting his aces and deuces. "Say! that spy and his round-up is your pal's dancin' party, ain't it?" His tone was one of open discovery and conviction.

Peggy nodded.

"Well, it seems they ain't actually got him, kid, but he's owned up. He wrote the commandin' officer a letter and told him so. Did you know that, Barkeep?"

Her ladyship's eyes were almost out of her head; she let the lids fall to screen them. Then she laughed a little, filled all the tumblers again, and replied, "No, sir, I didn't know that."

"Gone back on you, eh?" Mr. Birdsong and his gang all stared at the Barkeep's steady hand.

"Some," laconically.

"You don't need no quart bottle for your tears though, kid, do you?" Her ladyship smiled. "I swear you never shall 's long as Billy Birdsong can raise a gun. Just let 'em try to take a peep at you, and —"

Her ladyship at this particular instant was looking across the room, at, and out of, the window, where the cat, on the sill, was now curled up and

asleep, having with her motions pulled the calico aside from the pane.

What did her ladyship see through the dirty, little rain-dashed squares of glass, that caused her to pale once more under her stains, her eyes to start, her pulses to quiver riotously?

She beheld a man's face, not quite recognizable, blanched, mud-bespattered, eager, yet wary; a face that it seemed to her she held somewhere in her memory, but the glimpse was too fleeting, the countenance too begrimed, for more. In this apparition there was menace, or so it seemed to her.

"— and," Billy Birdsong ran complacently on while Lady Peggy watched the face at the window vanish in the very instant of its appearance, " I'll guarantee to introjuce 'em to the inside character of Mexique lead, eh, pards? "

The gang set up a shout that was full of oaths. Then a step came on the stoop, a hand came on the latch, the door of Walsh's hotel swung open, and Someone walked in.

CHAPTER XIII

In which my Lady Peggy is ordered by the Captain "to pour for the crowd," and forthwith flings the mugs across the counter and declines to obey

WHEN Captain Churchill had quitted Lady Peggy in the earliest dawn-time of that day which was to fetch his letter of self-condemnation to the Colonel of the 42nd, he had mounted his pony, and, digging his spurs their depth into the animal's flanks, he had made a headlong pace for the Fort, twenty miles further up the border.

Then as the rain came beating at his face, the wind came whipping at his ears, and the image of her came knocking at his heart, he pulled rein, slackened and considered; Churchill turned his horse and rode back faster than he had come.

He made up his mind that he would beat the bush around Walsh's and watch out. It could be easily enough done. The cactus grew matted and thick, the mud made it impossible to hear a horse's shoes under your eyes even, the thunder went on crashing and bounding, over in old Mexique, and back again, ceaselessly.

As his mount put it southerly for all horse-flesh

was worth, the rider tried to pound it all out of his mind.

She had called him; he had heard her; he had gone to her; and found her; where? how placed?

Jack's brains struck work.

The girl he had known and loved, loved now better than ever, was hard to mix with the girl he had seen wrapped in blankets, lying in that alcove, with Kent Gratiot near her. If Gratiot had been her husband, why, all right. But Gratiot, by her own showing, and by Gratiot's, was not her husband!

The young man felt murder in his soul; his hand went down to the gun place, but the gun was missing; had he not instinctively left it with her?

Peg had refused to marry Gratiot, and read the riot act to the priest.

Peg had refused to marry him, and by all that man holds holy! he believed Peg loved him.

Peg, alone with Gratiot, had bade him (Churchill) leave her; had sent him from her with a cool, "Good-by."

He had left her with Kent Gratiot in that upper room in Walsh's hotel.

Then, even as his thought pointed, his glance took in the one-chimneyed shack. The Captain had reached Walsh's for the second time within two hours.

He saw the pallid gleam still shining in that upper window; he saw shadows, two of them, the

man's and the girl's; then he saw two men steal cautiously out of the lower door, and cross into the stables; there was a few moments' delay, apparently with lighting a lantern, for the flicker danced on the pools in the yard; the two then came out again, mounted on ponies and made off softly, stealthily, leaving the lantern hanging on the hay-arm; these two men had packs a-piece strapped to their backs. One he described accurately was Walsh; the other a slimmer, younger figure. Then? —

Then Peg and Gratiot were alone in the shack together; for he knew the Dominie had left before he had himself.

Jack slid from his saddle, tied his beast in the cactus a piece off from the house, plodded around to the rear. There was a trellis there hung thick with roses, sweet as honey, all lashed with rain, and fragrant as only flowers can be in the bountiful baths Nature gives them down yonder on the border between Texas and old Mexique.

He stood at one end of the arbor, fond, foolish; credulous that again he should hear her call, and that he would be here to answer.

But instead, as the soldier-man patrolled cautiously around the shack corner and back, he saw only the dusky beam of the upper-room lamp, heard nothing, until, yes, now, voices; and, these to the front!

The Captain, on guard, held his breath, crept

around so that he stood in complete shelter of the trellis, yet could see two figures on the stoop, the man's and the girl's. Hers with — God! her hand lifted and the gun in it, his gun.

Should he spring to her?

Had she called?

No.

She stood at the south end of the long stoop, hand up. Gratiot ran across to the stables, almost within touch of the unarmed soldier-man. Presently he was out, up on a dapple gray beast, and leading a second pony by the bridle.

In all these minutes her ladyship had not moved.

But the Captain, fearing Gratiot would see him, drew back into the arbor, bending to catch a sign, should there be one.

No sign came his way.

He heard Gratiot sing out as he splashed across the yard, "So long, Lady Peggy!" and more which he could not catch.

He watched, for the day was then breaking as full as it could through the tempest. As has already been said, Gratiot then went plunging into his safety.

Churchill remembered that his own life must pay the price of this other man's: but yet a little longer, a little longer, for her sake, he must tarry.

Gratiot, the spy, the clever trickster and dissembler, was likely enough to return.

The Captain decided to wait.

He hung around the shack, only able to feed his pony by tactics as he slid down the side-hill ladder, below the wall, under the rose trellis; so up, and at the oats and corn in the granary shed. As for himself he was starved, but, it is easily credible, more by love than by hunger of a baser sort.

All the day long, while her ladyship and the cat had pranced and fed, and disguised, and worn away the hours — her ladyship very sore at heart for him and her own wicked lies — he, pierced in soul, had haunted the shack and the shrub around it, eschewing even the empty stable where he dared not tether his beast, lest she should come out there for something and be affrighted.

But, at four o'clock, the Captain, seeing the time of day by his chronometer, knowing that he must report at Fort McHenry that night or have a dozen men scouring the country for a coward, lay himself down for a bit of a rest on the hay in the stable loft, and that which had awakened him was nothing else than the “hello! hello!” of the Tucson Terror and his pals.

Churchill sprang up and was down the ladder, outside, up the hill, and into the arbor, before anyone of them caught sight or sound of him.

Thereafter, he had with twenty mad minds paced the yard, climbed the brace and roof over the stoop, crawled to the upper window and actu-

ally peered in; no one was to be seen, nothing, other than when he had entered it at the dawn of that very day. Unless it might be a pile of dusty clothes and mildewed old shoes, with a broom on top of them, in one far corner.

Peggy, wherever else she was, was not up there.

He crawled down aground again, just about the auspicious moment when the merry pals of Mr. Birdsong were urging upon their chief the desirability of pouring the whisky down the reluctant throat of Walsh's raw Barkeep.

Jack heard their wild shouts, their oaths; he knew the quality, if not the identity, of the men. And, was Peggy alone under the roof with these vagabonds, while he, who worshipped her, stood like a fool and a dolt outside?

Being first quite sure that his saddle-girth was not too tight nor swollen with the wet, Churchill fetched his mount nearer the shack; dared now to tie the beast to the post at the stoop even; none of the stable for the soldier-man. His reckonings were building that pony of his for two, and having it handy likewise. Then he came to a halt, and listened; all seemed quiet inside. There was a terrified burst at his heart, a terrible swirl of imagination at work in his brain, and then, without a weapon it's true, and that the much more to his credit, since a gunless man in the border country isn't ever counted with long, Captain Churchill put his hand to the latch, pushed

open the door of Walsh's hotel, and walked in.

The Barkeep was on a soap-box, his back was turned, and he was reaching to an upper shelf for another demijohn, when all those there heard that mellow, hearty, searching,

"Hello, pard! howdy!" of Jack Churchill's.

"Jack Churchill's voice!" In the depths of her soul only, my Lady Peggy voiced the three words.

Perhaps her ladyship was very near to having another complete swoon that day, but she didn't. She didn't even turn her head, but went on selecting another demijohn.

"Hello, pard, who are you?" The Tucson Terror always made it a known point with his gang that he did the talking; at any rate the initiatory conversation with any stranger was his right of way.

"Yours truly," Churchill pulled a handful of silver out of his pocket and threw it on the counter. "Go it, Barkeep," he remarked, picking up a cork and correctly aiming at and hitting Lady Peggy's ear, "for all it's worth to the crowd, and then, some more." He jingled the coin in his other pocket, but the Barkeep did nothing save to nod backwards and go on searching, turning demijohns, bottles, and mugs.

Churchill stepped to the stove, opened the door, and seeing the fire was dead, asked,

"Where's Walsh?"

All eyes turned from the speaker to the slender boyish figure on the soap-box; not a soul of them knew he did it, or could have told why, if he'd been asked.

"Round-up," was her ladyship's curt rejoinder, for she had felt the appeal that she certainly could not see.

"Oh, get down out of that, young man, and pour. We are thirsty." Churchill lounged up to the bar. "We fellers want to get acquainted."

But Peggy went on rummaging.

"Come on down, kid," warned Mr. Birdsong. "This gentleman that's just come in 's been goin' some, I reckon; he's soaked."

Churchill nodded. "Yes, to the skin and the bone both," he laughed.

The rest of the men were smoking, drinking and playing cards.

"Ain't goin' to pour no more to-night." Her ladyship emphasized this remark, which indeed needed none, for it caused a sensation quite by itself, by throwing a couple of tin mugs to the floor with a rattle.

The Captain knew what his duty was in such company, and under such provocation, so of course he promptly put his right hand in the correct position for iron-play.

But Mr. Birdsong slowly shook his head, and, in an intimate tone, recommended the newcomer to, "let the kid alone; he's had his mixup —"

Lady Peggy's ears, strained to the cracking-point, heard the tone; her instinct premonized the outcome; she knew these men were most ways ready to tell their stories; that Jack was likely to hear things she did not want him to unless the Terror were halted. Therefore as the Tucson Terror went breezily onward in the path of confidence this way,—“he's kind of weary, I reckon, his pal, a gentleman in the line of the Ar—” her ladyship, gathered her forces, jumped from her soap-box pedestal, gave the first handspring of her life over the counter, and landed her weight on the arm of the Tucson Terror, while at the same instant, from her ladyship's inside pocket there flopped to the floor the parcel containing her ladyship's tresses, by luck not one curl of which however escaped the newspaper leash, as she recovered it with mingled dexterity and horror.

“What in hell!” demanded the Terror, while the card parties broke up *pro tem*, all to their feet but the newcomer, who sat down.

“Come out here with me, Mr. Birdsong, at once. Come on!” Lady Peggy, having with woman's skill, contrived all along to disguise her voice, now succeeded as well in keeping her countenance from the Captain's view.

The Fates know he would never have recognized in the Barkeep's dirty, swarthy visage, with its rumpled short locks, the entrancing face of her beautiful and bewitching ladyship.

"I think young Barkeep had better pour first," remarked the Captain in that leisurely but threatening tone, which is meant to convey an unlimited faith in bullets to arrive. Jack had his end to sustain, it must be recollect; he could not afford to leave any of the customary stones unturned that were in keeping with the time, the place, and the people.

"Reckon not, pard; this here kid's one of us, and —"

Lady Peggy, whispering at the ear of the Tucson Terror, had pulled him the short distance between the counter and the entry door. "Reckon as you'll have to excuse him for this evening. Any gun-play as you may care about can be settled up with yours truly, when I get back; meantime, Pansey'll pour for the crowd." Pansey, being the Second in command, at once poured.

At the first words of Birdsong, Churchill had sprung to his feet ready for the fight he believed must come, but presently, as he saw that bullets were not in order, he laughed good-humoredly and put out his hand for the tumbler, which Pansey had pushed toward him.

Outside in the entry, her ladyship in quick panting whispers, was saying to her companion,

"You was goin' to give me away!"

"Nope." The Tucson Terror shook his head most decidedly.

"Ain't doin' no such fool thing."

142 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"Yes, but you was. That stranger may be someone on my track from one of the Forts." Her ladyship's tone was more genuine than even the gentleman she addressed imagined it could be.

"He's partly in civilian," was the response, as the Terror chewed his cigar.

"Pshaw! can't a man buy any clothes he chooses?" asked her ladyship with directness.

The two stood under the dirty, smoky swing-lamp, and all the light it gave was on her ladyship's face and figure.

The Tucson Terror, with his big Havana between his lips, chucked her under the chin, turned her face up, and stared down into it; the eyes that historians have described as piercingly keen were fixed upon her ladyship's own blue orbs.

"Kid, you ever seen that tenderfoot before?" he inquired.

"This here Barkeep never seen that man before. No, sir," was Lady Peggy's reply uttered in promptness and as a neat compromise with veracity.

"O.K. Reckon as you're square, kid; come on in back." Birdsong started for the barroom.

"I'm afraid of him," Peggy said, holding back.

"No need to be scared, son, with me 'round any place you ever get in. You'd be safe in hell with the Tucson Terror." His tone was pompous

and yet not ill-founded, considering his reputation.

"Don't tell him," she entreated, still holding back.

"What you talkin' about? Billy Birdsong peach on a pal! On a kid? Not much. You're safe as a kitten in a cushion. I'll give the tip as soon as the boys set eyes on me. We got a sign language all to our lonesomes. Come along, back, now, and pour," said the Terror soothingly, as he released Peggy's chin, and edged with her toward the barroom.

Her ladyship shook her head. "Tell you, Mr. Birdsong—"

Nobody who doesn't know the borderland and its creature, can figure out the soothe that that "Mr." worked on the temperamental conditions of the gentleman from Tucson. He hadn't been called "Mr." by any living soul since the day he'd hurried a priest in, to marry him to a dying girl in the slums of Mexico City.

"—Mr. Birdsong," proceeded her ladyship, "I don't want no acquaintance with that newcomer. He's not my style. He'll want to talk to me. I ain't no good on conversation."

"Let him talk," urged the Terror. "You needn't to. It's better for your game not to quit. I'll size him up p.d.q."

"I don't mind his talkin' so much, but I do mind his lookin' at me."

144 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"Why?" turning stiff, straight and suspicious eyes upon her.

"Because, since you will have it out of me, Mr. Birdsong, I reckon that gent has seen me before. There!"

CHAPTER XIV

In which her ladyship and her lover encounter each other, in the dark at the threshold of the upper room, at Walsh's hotel, while the Tucson Terror waits with his pals below.

"O.K., kid. Go on up to bed then. You look sort of owly. Listen. If the rascal wants to talk to you — never can tell what the law and order gang is up to, I'll let him! you put out your lamp, kid, and let him damn talk all he wants to. Don't show no white feathers in them wings of yours, kid. Bluff it out. He shan't nab you; trust Billy Birdsong for so much. Go on up, but don't avoid the party too far to the point, see?"

Her ladyship said she saw, and clutching the parcel of her shorn locks, holding her heart to still its wild beating, Lady Peggy de Bohun skipped up the stairs but did not enter the upper room at all; she sat down on the top step of the staircase at the landing, and, her cap on her head, fell to a not impious duet of prayer and eavesdropping.

Since the shack was very small and the bar-room without a door, she could hear nearly all that passed below.

146 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

Upon her soul there sat a foreboding of evil to come to Churchill; explain it she could not, nor yet could she account for his presence.

She dared not surmise even, that it was on her behalf. If so, had he been back to Fort McHenry? What were her aunt's feelings and conditions? Did all the people there believe her to have eloped with a husband? Had Florida Payne been sensible enough to comprehend the ruse, or had she not?

Where was Kent Gratiot?

Had Captain Churchill a weapon?

Her fingers closed over the pistol he had left on the table only that morning, when she had sent him from her.

Only that morning! To her ladyship, sitting huddled, forlorn, eager and bewildered on the step, "that morning" seemed ages ago.

Below she heard the flip-flap of the cards, the tinkle of the filling glasses, the rattle of mugs, the occasional exclamations of the players, and the murmur of two voices, the Captain's and the Terror's, indistinct but recognizable; doubtless these two setting the Barkeep matter straight; and then, clearer; as if, the preliminaries over, action was about to begin, she discerned Jack's voice as it rose a half tone.

"Glad to know you, Birdsong. Been hearing of you a good while. Been here at Walsh's long?"

"Just fetched up here an hour ago," was the easy rejoinder.

"That so? How's business?" The soldier-man spoke quite as if business with him were identical with business for his companion.

"There's always fifty-two cards in every pack, pard," was, however, the cautious reply of the Tucson Terror, as he shuffled his pack.

Churchill, despite the quiver of his nerves, and the aim of his being just where he was, smiled as he retorted,

"True for you, but, how's the horse game, eh?" The Captain's emphasis was friendly and savored plainly of dealings along the same lines as Mr. Birdsong's own.

Nevertheless Mr. Birdsong, in an unmistakable but leisurely manner drew out his gun and laid it on the table; it is almost needless to say that his example was followed by all the gang.

Her ladyship heard the jangle of the irons on the iron tables at which the men were seated; it was a music that she knew spelled trouble. She had listened to it before then at Punty's.

Churchill, having no weapon, could not do likewise, but her ladyship of course could not be sure as to this.

"There's our guns, pard; where's yours?" The Terror's tone was one strictly of business, and even more strictly indicative of trouble.

"Oh," the soldier-man replied airily enough,

"mine's where it will do the most good, when needed!"

As Peg heard this her heart throbbed to suffocation. She also heard the Tucson Terror push back his chair, rise, and stamp across the room.

"See here," he said, leaning lazily against the counter, a nonchalance not duplicated in his light steely eyes, "what are you, anyhow?" The tone implied a quickly adjusted corpse unless the answer should prove more satisfactory than the speaker anticipated.

"The Army," laconic and decisive was the Captain's response.

"Law and order, eh?" sneered the Terror, while his pals now stood straight up in their boots and perfectly at attention.

Churchill nodded, adding cheerfully, "Secret Service too."

The gang clustered around their leader, each of twelve eyes awaiting the signal for active and not at all secret service.

Lady Peggy was hardly able to control herself; she slid one step lower down and leaned to catch what should come next. In that curious moment, she felt the protective thrill that comes to all men, and sometimes to a woman, who finds herself placed in such a position as hers there was, toward the one beloved.

"Say!" Mr. Birdsong now brought his fist down with a thump that sent things rattling all

along the counter. "Stranger, what's your game?"

"I'll tell you," said the Captain easily, and even confidentially, as he first raised his glass to his lips and drained it. "I've been chasing this half the globe for a spy."

"Oh, you have, eh? Well?" There was no let-up in the Terror's demeanor; in his heart he imagined the sought-for spy to be the slim boy of a Barkeep.

"He's settled." Lady Peggy's heart bounced again inside her ragged soldier jacket as she listened to the words Jack Churchill nonchalantly spoke.

"Oh, is he? We heard he'd got off with his wife." An element of decided doubt was in Mr. Birdsong's retort.

Churchill shook his head slowly. "No, pard," he answered quietly, "he'll be shot, sure, before sun-down day after to-morrow."

Her ladyship slid down another step, one hand upon the packet of her hair, her breath almost failing her.

"Heard he'd confessed and given himself up?" This from Pansey, the Second in command, whose manner was quite unconvinced.

The Captain smiled. "They do do that sometimes." He filled his glass and drank again in a leisurely fashion.

Lady Peg concluded then that Gratiot had

150 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

ridden from her to the Fort and surrendered himself, after all; and poor Florida! What of her?

But Gratiot as she remembered him would never do this.

"So far so good," the Terror remarked after a slight pause. "Now, you see, we fellers, doin' the line of business we do, is always rather particklar to be certain who we're associatin' with. What are you here for?" Billy Birdsong's little finger, decked with a diamond of the first water, touched lightly at his pistol as he spoke.

"Business," was the soldier-man's easy calm reply.

"What sort of business?" Birdsong spoke categorically, and with that authority which had renamed him very early in his career the Tucson Terror.

"A lady." Churchill said it simply, and in a tone a trifle lower than he had hitherto made use of.

"Oh," with ill-concealed derision. "Come off!" The Terror laughed and the gang smiled with their leader.

Her ladyship at this, pulled herself up the two steps she had gone down, and clung with one frantic hand to the ricketty balustrade, her head spinning for pure joy; all else was clean forgotten in that supreme, sweet moment which told her he was there, here, to her account!

The gang went back to their little cast-iron tables, while the leader sighed and put his gun back in his pocket with the air of one who feels that if ladies are in the pool nothing can be said of much value.

"We ain't noways concerned with that outfit," Mr. Birdsong remarked.

"Since you are here, you may be. Have you seen any lady about since you came, may I ask?" The Captain's inquiry caused them all to look questioningly around the place.

"No, tenderfoot, we ain't. We ain't lookin' for that kind of trouble just now," Birdsong sighed, it might be in either reminiscence or anticipation.

The gang shook a unanimous vote, as they went on with their cards.

"She was here," proceeded the Captain, masking his fever well with a professional deliberateness, "this A. M."

"Well, she ain't here now," conclusively returned the Terror.

"That young Barkeep was here, when you arrived, wasn't he, pard?" Churchill inquired.

Her ladyship hoisted herself to her feet quickly and with fright; her bones were aching with tension as she edged backwards to the door of the upper room.

"Sure; him, and no one else," Pansey made the answer.

152 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"Then the little Barkeep must have seen the lady I'm looking for," the soldier-man spoke with conviction.

"Likely he did. Want to talk to him, pard?" asked the Terror as he took several obliging steps toward the foot of the staircase.

Churchill nodded. "Yes. I certainly do. Where is he?"

"Well, he sleeps above, go and rattle him up and question him. I used to have some knowledge of girls, and p'raps I can guess it how you're feelin', 'less she's a spy?"

"No spy," said the Captain quietly.

That was what she was, though, a spy upon him. Her ladyship felt the word fitting her far better than did the garments she wore. She heard the Captain's step in the entry, on the stair, and then with a frantic grasp she opened the door of that upper room, and stood a bit within the threshold, her attitude that of one emerging suddenly.

The while the Captain mounted the stairs quite deliberately.

Mr. Birdsong's voice sang briskly up to her as he kicked the balustrade vigorously, "Hi, there, Barkeep, hello! Wake up, this gent here wants to talk to you about a lady!"

"All right," responded Lady Peggy in a sleepy tone. "I'm awake up here."

The entry was dark, too dark for either her

ladyship or the soldier-man to exchange any glances of any kind.

"Want to talk to me?" she asked sulkily.

"You're the Barkeep?" Churchill inquired pleasantly.

"I'm the chap behind the drinks in this here shack. What do you want?" The tone was irascible and sleepy too.

"Nothing without pay, my honest young friend. Here," the Captain tendered a bill with an X on it, which her ladyship, after an infinitesimal second's hesitation, took.

Below, at the foot of the stairs, she could see down the square well, the Terror, true to his promise, was keeping close tabs on the Captain. In point of fact, at that particular juncture, Mr. Birdsong's gaze, partaking of that nature best described as greedy, was resting for the second time that evening upon the roll of bills which Churchill took from his pocket, as he selected the one for her ladyship therefrom. Also, could Lady Peg but have seen it, the glance of the leader exchanged itself with some reciprocal glances of his pals, in connection with some pantomime regarding the chronometer, heavy gold chain, diamond cuff-links, opal scarf-pin, and cat's-eye rings, which the Captain habitually wore.

"Decidedly," as Pansey, the Second in command, whispered, in more variegated language it is true, to his nearest running mate, "it would

have been a fool mistake to let all that boodle get away; and how neatly the Terror had contrived to put the stranger at that disadvantage of position which would insure the quickest and easiest transfer of his valuables!"

Her ladyship, meantime, was in a sense glad of the friendly proximity of about the most precious rogue in the States, while Captain Churchill had no chain of thought other than to discover, at any cost or risk, the whereabouts of the girl he had last seen that morning, inside the very room at whose door-sill the young Barkeep now stood.

"Thank you, sir," said Peggy, tucking the bill comfortably away with the packet of her shorn tresses, her atmosphere seemingly appeased by the tip.

"Now, Barkeep, how long have you been here?" Churchill asked confidentially and cheerfully.

"Since yesterday," came the answer promptly.

"Oh, you're a new hand then?" His tone was one of some disappointment.

"Yes, a new hand." Could he who catechized her, but know how new!

"You were here though, when a man and a lady arrived sometime last night, were you not?" asked Churchill eagerly.

Her ladyship shook her head. "No, I wasn't."

"You know they did arrive? You saw them after they got here then?" he asked still more eagerly.

"I saw the man, but I didn't see the lady." Poor Peg! she stuck to the truth when she could.

"You know there was a lady?" The soldier-man felt like a cross-questioning lawyer with a raw witness, as he probed this boy.

"Yes, I do," she spoke with feeling.

"The man went away?" He wished to render assurance doubly sure.

"Yes"; it was said with firmness.

"And the lady, now, where is she?" in a soothing tone, not as if his nerves were racked, his brain tortured with cruel and horrible anxiety.

"That I couldn't say." The Barkeep shook his head and sighed as if he were anxious to return to his slumbers.

"That's subterfuge, quibble; you can say but you won't. Here's another ten." The Captain jerked one out of his wad, while Birdsong, looking up, beheld the inflammatory roll for the third time that night.

"N.G." Her ladyship shook her head. "I ain't seen no lady. I don't know how to say anything more to you about her," which was so veracious that it should have carried conviction; only it didn't.

The Captain came a pace nearer to her, and whispered, "Any sum you name if you tell me;

156 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

is she here, concealed, anywhere?" Birdsong couldn't hear that, but he allowed it to be concerning the lady and was not anxious.

"I'm sure she ain't, sir; I don't want no more of your money. If there'd been a lady here, reckon I'd have seen her. I been all over the shack, up and down, top to bottom, me and the cat; there ain't no lady here." With what force and feeling the slim lad uttered these homely words!

Churchill believed the Barkeep; still he was none the less puzzled.

"Could she have gone without your seeing her?" he asked.

"She could, sir," with ample decision. "I'm sure she could. I wouldn't see her. I was hard at work clearin' up."

"But she had no horse?" Peggy could not start to walk on a night like this; no one could do it.

"She might have walked," Peg seemingly answered his thought.

"It's hardly possible." There was a pause. Below, it was filled by a gathering of one-half of the little clan in a compact bunch at the bottom of the stairs, their blunt fingers around their guns; with them stood the Tucson Terror, his hands were free of an iron; he let his minions do the trigger work in cases of this kind, when shooting became necessary and shooting it is needless to add was mostly a necessity with Mr. Birdsong.

The other three stood; two at the doorway, one at the window, stroking the cat's fur with the butt of his weapon. Over the dim lamp, Pansey had hung the tin dish pan, which did away with all undue light upon the little scene.

After the infinitesimal pause, Churchill asked, still in a low tone: "Boy, do you sleep in this room?"

"Try to," rejoined her ladyship, shuddering as she recalled that morning when she had regained consciousness only to find herself lying there.

"Is there a pistol on the table in there?" Churchill asked quickly.

"No, sir, there ain't," was the as quick reply.

"Was there one there when you went into this room to-day?" he proceeded probingly.

"Yes, there was." The tone she assumed was sulky and tired.

"You took it?" Churchill grasped her arm savagely; intent, as it were, to wrest the facts and not the gun away from her.

"The lady took it"; Peggy freed herself with a clever and dexterous motion.

"Then the lady was here!" he triumphantly exclaimed.

"I know she was; but I tell you I didn't see her," was the absolutely truthful concession.

"Walsh saw her?" Churchill went on.

"Sure," Peg was sure of that.

158 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"Ah, that's how you know." With apparent relief. "But the gun's gone?" he pursued.

"It ain't here. Come in, if you want to, and see." She stood aside at the threshold.

"I don't want to," he spoke with strange decision as he turned to go down the stairs. He was thinking, "Peggy out a-foot on a night like this, alone, but with my pistol in her possession." The Captain thanked the Supreme for that, while her ladyship, her right hand on the weapon so much in question, within her trousers pocket, watched him descend the ricketty stairs.

CHAPTER XV.

In which my Lady Peggy saves her lover's life with her lover's pistol, and is called a "halt on your life" by Mr. Bandy Bergh of New York

THE Captain did not descend very far, just four steps, and then, Mr. Billy Birdsong, with that peculiar action of the left biceps which has rendered him famous down Mexique way, and all along the border, gave free play to its exhibition around Captain Churchill's handsome throat, while his right hand acquainted itself intimately with the roll of bills in the Captain's trousers pocket. While Pansey, Second in command, held the Captain's arms, and another of the brood did equal duty at his legs.

"There now, son," remarked the Terror, as he and his lieutenants nimbly dissociated the Captain's watch, cuff-links, pin and rings, from his person. "'Tain't no sort of use to holler. There's no one in this here shack but friends of mine. You ain't even armed!" They had, by this, carefully searched all the soldier-man's pockets—"and we ain't got no sort of idea of quittin' the job until we've secured all we want."

"You damn scoundrel, you! Give a man half

a chance!" Churchill freed himself from one trio, only to be seized by the second three; from these, for he was powerful and plucky, he wrenched and screwed himself away. Then he showered blows with the deal stool he had contrived to seize.

They were not quite prepared for this sort of thing; they had counted on a gun, and on getting easy possession of it, but they had not sized up the stranger for all the muscle he was worth.

"Get him, boys, alive or dead; there's more money on him," shouted the Terror, himself taking a hand at the victim and then for a few seconds it was rather a bit of a racket with not much show for the Captain.

When — but not one of them had reckoned on the Barkeep.

Her ladyship had bolted to the top of those stairs. A moment did let slip while she had committed her wicked self to heaven; while she begged, as woman never begged before, for strength to save the one so dear to her; and then out of her trousers pocket came the Captain's pistol, her ladyship down on one knee, her head out between the balustrades, her eyes picking the Tucson Terror's legs, her ladyship's finger on the trigger.

Let her go! whiz! whir! She waited a second to see the consternation, the balk, the fall to pieces of the gang. Churchill dashed out of the

door, the Second and the five dashed to the stairs, as Birdsong feebly yelled:

"Up! up! Kill the damned little cutthroat! Chop him to pieces. It's the Barkeep! the Barkeep!" Then Mr. Birdsong rolled over rather the worse of his bullets. In plain terms, his pals were demoralized, for Billy Birdsong had never taken a bullet before.

And her ladyship? Even in this awful minute she was positively glorying in the fact that she had saved him. She dashed back into the room, then out of the window, onto the porch roof, creeping to the corner post, slipping down it like a lad, splash she went into the mud, even descrying the astonished cat on her path. Plunge she went to the stable, on the way stumbling over the Captain himself. "To your horse, sir, for your life! The lady you're lookin' for may be lookin' for you somewhere too! and them blackguards will kill you dead if they catch you now!"

Churchill sprang into his saddle, but hovered in the bush until he should see that this brave lad was safe.

My Lady Peggy, while the gang, or a part of them, were searching the shack for her, from garret to cellar, got into the stable, and, by the glimmer of the newly risen lady moon, she easily, with her knowledge of horse-flesh, chose the best mount there. This was a black with a white star nose and one white forefoot, the very animal in

fact which Mr. Birdsong had lately appropriated to his own uses, away from the gentleman tourist to whom it had belonged by the more licensed methods of sale and purchase; a nag, which, as her ladyship bestrode it, with nothing but a halter to help, she well knew to be worth at least a few hundreds.

As she drove her hob-nailed shoes into its sides, she drew the rope taut. As she guided her prize out of the yard, to the string of puddles called a road, as she smoothed its ears, she felt the quiver of blood and lineage thrilling beneath her light and springy weight, as no one, who does not love the horse, can feel. Then she beheld Churchill gliding very cautiously from his lair; he saluted her, he watched her start, he waved his arm to her. She heard him say, "Barkeep, yours truly. I'll not forget you. Come to Punty's Hotel at Fort McHenry. There'll be something waiting there for you. So long!" Then Lady Peggy's lover was off and away, far away from her.

"Punty's hotel!" That is what he had said. That was her goal! How little he had dreamed it as he sung it out under his breath to the Barkeep boy!

Captain Churchill planned to leave in his will a fine sum for that Barkeep, also some jewelry and clothes and the horse he rode.

Lady Peggy did love horses, from Percherons

to Shetlands, and they usually returned the compliment. As she rode for her life now, she couldn't help or resist the splendid throb of being up on such a beast as the one she had stolen.

Yes, that was the word her ladyship used. Stolen. So she had.

As the black skimmed the pools and the ruts and the ditches like a bird under her ladyship's supple guidance, her own thoughts flew as fast as her horse's heels, back through all those episodes which she was pleased to call the "tissue of lies and deceits" she had glibly practiced, down to the forlorn plight in which she now was; a horse-thief-maid-masquerading-as-a-man.

In whose clothes?

Who knew! But at the end, came the note victorious after all; she had seen, heard with her own ears and eyes, that Jack Churchill was seeking for her, and she had saved his life. He had waited at the peril of that life just now too, for sake of the Barkeep.

These were, to her, magnificent compensations for all the rest. With the top of the morning saluting her from over the hills and far away, with the first gleam of sunshine seen along the border for eighty hours, with the songs of birds in the branches, the scent of the wild rose in the air, all the world as young once more as at the birth of Eden, my Lady Peggy rode on toward

Punty's, where she estimated to be within two hours at the least. She expected to gain an entrance under cover, and so restore herself to her aunt, and to her own forsown estate, and to the soldier-man.

Had he not said "Punty's?" That was her watchword as she rode on.

But later on as Lady Peggy rode, the fresh and buoyant wind striking her face into smiles of anticipation, she beheld approaching, a big touring-car. The so-called road was but a narrow path; in duty bound she must slacken and swerve, or be knocked as high as a touring-car can do it, which is a limitless height, often reaching, it is said, or hoped, or feared, to heaven itself.

She felt one pang at her heart as she pulled the rope in over the black's sensitive nose; she felt two pangs as she noted now that the car contained four men, three and the chauffeur; three pangs; no, three thousand! as she discerned with perfect distinctness the face of one, free for the moment of goggles or cap. It was the imper-turbable, round, pink and white countenance of Bandy Bergh.

Her ladyship had last seen Mr. Bergh in her own parlor at the Plaza.

In a flash she remembered that she had left town because she wanted things different, some kind of a grand change. Peg, surveying her trousers and her extraordinary shoes, reached the

swift and just conclusion, that Fate had granted her a change in excess of her wildest desires.

She had but just forced her mount out of the rut, for the roadway just here was really little else, into a pool that reached her heels, when a concerted shout of amazement, triumph and resolute command rent the air, coming four-deep from all the occupants of the big touring-car.

“ Halt on your life! ”

CHAPTER XVI

In which Lieutenant Thorsby essays to take possession, and wherein the three guardsmen think they have found out where Lady Peggy went when she left town

IT was back at Punty's hotel on the morning after Lady Peggy's flight, and it was a sorry time. That a staid and reputable lady like Miss Pamela Burgoyne should waken on a vile tempestuous day to find that her ward and niece had fled in the night, apparently with a man to whom she certainly was not married, although she did bear his name, leaving no word or note of warning, explanation, or farewell, proved quite enough to unstring the nerves of even a chaperone who had enjoyed the discipline which her ladyship's pranks in the past had afforded her.

But Miss Pamela, having, after all, a good grip on herself and her emotions, realized from the word go, that she could not confide in any living being within her reach. Not to Punty, or Punty's wife; not to Captain Churchill, whom in her virginal soul she believed Peg loved; not in young Thorsby; not in the Colonel at the Fort. No, not even to the Colonel, whom she really adored.

There was no one else.

And Miss Pam realized too that to rehearse to anyone of these people the true state of the case as to the supposed "Mrs. Gratiot," would be but to lay her niece open to a misconstruction of the deepest dye.

Miss Pam, therefore, although to the running accompaniment of many tears, and sobs, agreed with herself for silence and a quick departure.

She came of a fine stock; in her veins ran the same blood that sprung so blithely through the arteries of my Lady Peggy herself; the same blood that had flowed merrily and sometimes ruefully, it is true, through the composition of the first Lady Peggy. Consequently, when Miss Pamela had hastily but completely packed her trunks and also Peggy's, and notwithstanding stress of mind and of weather, paid her bill, and had herself and her luggage, also her ladyship's luggage, conveyed away from Punty's that morning, intending to make the station, fifteen miles away, in time for the train for Mexico City, no one had any remarks to make, save the mournful farewells of Punty and his spouse. In fact, no one else knew anything about it.

Miss Pam got off, as she had intended to, before the officers from the Fort could possibly come over. Truth to tell she feared an encounter with Captain Churchill, and she felt almost sure that, between her sympathy with his

seemingly lost cause, and her knowledge that Peggy was not "Mrs. Gratiot," she should certainly give way and tell him the truth.

Yet, how could she! Peggy had been gone away over night! Gratiot and she had seemed to go together, since both were gone.

Poor Miss Pam; hers was a more than distracted mind when she mounted the coach and was borne away, while the winds howled, the waters poured, the lightning and the thunder played their game. Mexico City, lawyers and detectives for her! was her inward determination.

Florida Payne and Judy watched her going from the window of their room across the yard.

"Oh," Florida cried out, bitterly, "don't talk to me, Judy Payne; it's all a plain-sailing story. Even the chaperone, or aunt, or whatever she is, of Mrs. Gratiot, leaves too. She's run away with her own husband. Why shouldn't she? I know she told me she didn't love him. That was bluff so as to gain time and save him. I wish I'd held my tongue and not told her a thing, and let this Captain Churchill get him and shoot him dead."

"No, you don't, Florida," Judy's bright eyes were peering through the rain-dashed little panes, looking, for whom, or for what?

"Yes, I do. He's tricked me, fooled me, made game of me, with a wife all the time!" The tears fell in floods from her weary eyes.

"Seems to me, if the story Mrs. Punty tells is true, he couldn't have cared too much about her, never to have looked her up in four years!" ejaculated Judy with some show of justice.

"Well," Florida retorted fiercely, "they've gone together anyway; I've saved his life for him, and for her! and I wish I was dead."

The younger girl put her arms around the older one. "No, dear, not that. No matter what, Florida, there's always Dad and me."

Florida pushed Judy angrily away.

"What is Dad to me? or you? or anyone in the world without Kent Gratiot?" She threw herself on the cot and buried her face in the little measly pillows.

Judy knelt beside her, smoothed her, coaxed and stroked her; neither girl had slept all night. At last, worn out with what she had been through for the forty-eight hours before, Florida did fall into a dull sleep; but Judy, alert, full of youth's fine vivacity in connection with certain matters, rose, went to the window, and saw the Lieutenant below, just being about to fire a pebble at her pane.

She put her finger to her lips, as she glanced over her shoulder; then she pointed to the hotel parlor, and ran down out into the little yard in the dripping splashing rain. How good it felt to Judy Payne! how the drops drew the red blood up into her golden freckles; how she joyed in the

pelting on her shoulders; in brief, how delicious it was to be going over to meet him.

The Lieutenant's spirit met her own on an equal or rather an ascending plane. What were storms, tempests, spies, foes, ladies-running-away-with-their-husbands or without them, friends in love with girls they could not have, the whole round world topsy-turvy, to him? as he sat at the piano and sang:

What did they talk about?

Nobody knows.

Only the moon, and the mist,—

And the rose,

They are the three only things that hear,

What a chap says in a little girl's ear.

Judy, as she reached the door, joined in the chorus; their eyes met in good morning; he jumped up and over to her.

"Those freckles are darling!" he exclaimed rapturously inspecting them.

Judy pouted, she even flouted him a bit.

"How's your sister?" inquired Thorsby assuming a decorum he did not feel.

"Asleep, thank you, Lieutenant Thorsby."

"Good." Decorum then might slip the leash a little, perhaps; he essayed to draw Judy to the sofa.

"How are you?" she held back as she asked it politely.

"Happy," he said pointedly and still urging the sofa as a goal.

"Has anything happened?" The girl of the freckles asked it anxiously it seemed to him.

"Nothing that I know of — yet," he smiled, in fact he actually laughed, for they had reached the sofa together.

"Then you don't know?" Puzzled is the word to describe Judy's emphasis.

"Don't know whether I know or not," Charley Thorsby said, seating the girl with the freckles, but standing up himself.

"Don't be stupid," she cried out impatiently.

"I always have been," was the meek response.

"Mr. and Mrs. Gratiot," Judy halted.

"Well — ?" Thorsby ejaculated expectantly but without interest.

"Have run away, eloped." She looked up at him.

"The deuce they have!" the young man paced up and down the room. He now understood in part. It was a bad business, but if the Captain loved Mrs. Gratiot enough to let Gratiot go, why! — he, Thorsby, hadn't thought that of Churchill. Whew! — when a man loves, does honor go by the board? But it was a hell of a position surely. He walked up and down the parlor several times. Judy was regarding him carefully. Thorsby was busy thinking. Thorsby

like a shot recollected the newly framed law. But then, who could know that Churchill had let Gratiot get off?

Where was Churchill anyway? he suddenly recalled that he hadn't seen him yet that morning.

Then Judy got up from the sofa and joined him as he walked back and forth. One timid little finger was laid upon his sleeve.

"Hello!" The quiver of it sent all the Captains, spies, honors, and dishonors in the world, flying to the farthest.

"What's the matter?" she asked ruefully, quitting him and going to the window.

"Nothing. Yes there is too. Everything." He had followed her.

"How?" Then as his hand touched hers she said: "I must go. I'm afraid Florida may waken and want some—"

"Milk, I suppose, eh?" He drew her back and into the center of the room. "No matter for Florida and the milk. It's you and I just for the present." Thorsby's voice was mature and quite masterful.

Judy gave a big sigh, as she heard him.

"Have me?" he asked eagerly.

Judy, regarded him with two mischievous appraising eyes, and shook her head in a prim little way.

"Why not?" he seemed amazed.

"We only met yesterday, Lieutenant, and we

know nothing of each other's dispositions, characters and so forth," was the wise reply.

"Let go of all that nonsense." His tone pushed it aside as he would have pushed aside the world for her sake. "Have me? Please do," he said pleadingly, as he went on his knees.

Judy gave another sigh, sounding, it must be confessed, rather enraptured than remonstrant.

"Won't you?" There were smiles from Judy. "You look pleased with me; are you?" the young fellow asked seriously.

She nodded her head gayly.

"Mine?" He was seizing her hands and he rose from the rag carpet.

"No. Not at all. I was pleased to see you on your knees."

"Why?" He was astonished and showed it, as he held back.

"Because all the others have done it sitting; in boats, or auto cars, or saddles, or on sofas, settees, and hammocks. I've always wanted one to do it this way, as they used to do in the eighteenth century. It's very charming and appealing!" A burst of merriest laughter accompanied Miss Judy Payne's remarks.

"All right. Glad to have suited you. Now, will you have me?" he asked downrightly and persistently.

"Haven't I got you already?" She was laughing and radiant.

"You plumb sure have." He said it from the bottom of his soul and went on his knees again before his shrine.

"Then — ? I guess what you mean is, can you have me? Isn't it, Lieutenant?" Judy's tone was dignified and eminently proper.

"May I rise?" he asked submissively.

"Yes."

Thorsby rose and in his fancy was about to take possession, when there also arose a considerable rumble and tooting outside; the hotel main door was flung open, and three men entered; Punty too was at his most deferential as the parlor door pushed wide open.

Mr. Thorsby, by this time, had, it must be explained, reached the extreme left-hand upper corner of the roof and was examining a case of stuffed rabbits with a profoundly interested air; Miss Judy Payne had attained the far right-hand lower corner and was engaged in a careful, absorbing survey of a basket of wax flowers under a glass globe; both these the treasured possessions of Mrs. Punty, being relics of her wedding day.

"Gentlemen from New York, Lieutenant Thorsby of the 42nd," said Punty pompously.

Thus introduced to each other the men bowed, shook hands even, such is the infection of the way of the West, and the newcomers got out their cards.

Thorsby took them and in due form presented each man to "Miss Judith Payne."

Their names were Albert Sterling, Harold Hammond, and Bandeur Bergh.

Judy took herself away at once; the men, smoking and awaiting the breakfast which Punty said he would serve for them in the parlor, fell into the easy talk that is usual with the sex; and the new arrivals wouldn't listen to anything but that Thorsby should sit at table with them when the tray was finally fetched in.

Over the coffee and rolls and bacon and eggs, Bandy Bergh said:

"Charming girl that, we had the pleasure of meeting just now?" Bandy had two eyes always for the sex opposite to his own; he argued that his eyes were not his heart; that, Mr. Bergh, everybody knew, had confided to one solitary girl.

"I think she is very charming," was the temperate rejoinder of Charley Thorsby!

"Any more of the sort hereabout?" asked Hammond.

The Lieutenant shook his head. "None."

"Only girl stopping here?" There was surprise in Sterling's manner.

"Only girl," responded Thorsby with more veracity than the others knew about.

"Lieutenant, to be frank, we're here on the hunt for a girl!" Hammond spoke.

Thorsby looked bad manneredly up over the brim of his coffee cup. "Not really?" as he set it down in the saucer.

"Yes, that's just so," Sterling then took up the thread. "We're a kind of twentieth-century, three-guardsmen arrangement. This way: she left town."

"I see," broke in Thorsby with a comprehensive nod.

"And," continued Bandy, "as no one could say where she'd gone, or if alone, or what the deuce it meant, as we all were somewhat, interested, eh, boys?" He turned inquiring eyes upon his companions.

"Interested, yes, quite so," confirmed Mr. Hammond.

"Interested be damned!" ejaculated Sterling. "We're all crazy about her. There's no use mincing things, old man; crazy's the word. Yes, Mr. Thorsby, crazy!"

"All three?" Thorsby pursed up his lips, "and so amiable with each other?"

"Three," growled Hammond; "my lad, there's a thousand threes sailing around, floundering in the same boat."

"An actress, of course," murmured Thorsby conclusively.

"No, sir, nothing of the kind. Her ladyship is not that sort at all."

"English, I suppose?"

"Partly," conceded Mr. Bergh.

"Have you located the lady yet?" the Lieutenant inquired civilly.

"Well, you see, Mr. Thorsby, it's like this; we did a bit of detective work before we left town, and the result was that we traced her ladyship to Washington, D. C., then on up to Canada, Banff, to Denver, and so on; west; then south, nearly to Mexico; the fighting over there, you see, seemed to break up our scent until we struck a trail that's brought us right here." Hammond spoke with decision and a species of defiance, his eyes upon Thorsby's face as he laid down his knife and fork. "Lieutenant, is not Lady Peggy de Bohun here, or near here, man to man, sir?"

CHAPTER XVII

In which the three guardsmen express a wish to meet Mr. Billy Birdsong face-to-face; and in which also the Colonel receives the Captain's letter

THORSBY raised his right hand a trifle.

"Man to man, Mr. Hammond, she is not, nor has been. I never heard the name before in my life, although I'll admit I've seen it in the papers."

"You would know if she had been here;" Mr. Bergh sighed reminiscently as he added: "You've been stationed here for how long, may I ask, Mr. Thorsby?"

"I would certainly know, Mr. Bergh. The 42nd has been stationed at Fort McHenry now for eighteen months. In that time there have been but three women seen here, three young women that is; I take it, Lady Peggy de Bohun is young?" The Lieutenant laughed.

"She is twenty-two," responded Bergh gloomily, "so far as years go; but back as far as Cleopatra and that other lady who broke men's hearts, what's her name, Hammond? Helen of Troy! Yes, in the matter of knowing how to do us men up."

"Always thought that Greek girl's name ought to have been Hell in Troy," remarked Sterling with a gloom corresponding to Bandy's own.

"So her ladyship hasn't been here after all?" Hammond's despondency equaled that of the other two; in fact the three guardsmen were all of such a melancholy and united aspect that Charley Thorsby burst into a hearty laugh and a "beg pardon, gentlemen, but I never before witnessed such a uniform and symmetrical partnership in woe in my life. Didn't the lady favor any one of you?" He could venture to make the query, as the trio seemed in no way to object to publicity for their united affair.

Three dejected shakes of the head were the sole response.

"Oh, no," Bandy then spoke, almost in a reproachful way, "her ladyship never favored any of us, nor anyone else," he added naïvely.

"She had a way with her—" Hammond began instructingly.

"Evidently, Mr. Hammond," interrupted Charley Thorsby.

"—a way with her," Sterling pieced on, "that kept the whole lot of us just going, you know?" Thorsby nodded comprehendingly. "Everyone of us felt that some day or hour Lady Peggy would pin down to someone; that she must, and, for all any of us could tell, one of us was as likely to be it as another."

"Nice comfortable type of girl." Thorsby's tone was ironical, but neither of the guardsmen minded that. They were used to the gibes of their fellow men and rather enjoyed the unique aspect of their partnership.

"We're bound together by a strong tie, Mr. Thorsby," observed Bandy resignedly. Then he went on matter of factly: "We've brought out here with us, a machine." The young officer now glanced up eagerly. "Yes, a Wright biplane; you know, sir, they are well designed for military use; big, but quite portable, that's the reason I chose one; I knew I could get it out here easier than the more roomy dirigible, and that if we had to chase the air for her ladyship or coerce her into a flying machine, the Wright was the right sort of a bird for the business."

"I see. We are to have one soon at the Fort." The young officer was interested at once.

"And we fetched a car of course; she's out," he indicated the stable and barn, "there; that's Sterling's part of the outfit." Sterling inclined his head.

"Hammond fetched four horses," added Bandy. "So you see we ought to be able to catch up with Lady Peggy somehow, oughtn't we, now?" Bandy Bergh was a new sort for Thorsby; and to say that he enjoyed him was putting it mildly. Bandy's exquisite fit in the cloth these three had cut for themselves was so admi-

rable that it filled the young officer with delight.

"I should say!" adding reflectively, "If you only knew where to try to find her now," was Thorsby's response.

"We thought we had it down fine yesterday," Hammond exclaimed. "We caught on to a clew of a girl and a man, seen riding on two ponies for life or death, in that storm, and the description tallied a bit with her ladyship." His emphasis was thoughtful.

"Oh, then there is a fourth guardsman," cried Thorsby; "her ladyship has eloped?"

"No, no, Lieutenant. Lady Peggy would not elope, at least we think not, eh, boys?" Sterling asked of the others.

"No," Hammond said firmly, "she wouldn't miss sweeping down the aisle between the ranks of the rejected and forlorn, nor would the man that gets her either! Gad! St. Thomas's will be a show the day Lady Peggy gets married!"

"We've just had an elopement here," Thorsby said with a smile.

"Thought there were no girls here!" Bandy looked quickly up at his guest.

"She was a widow, Mr. Bergh; a very charming widow; at least she supposed she was, when the husband turned up; and off they went together, nobody knows why, or where to?"

"What's her name?" queried Bandy who always asked a question if it could be asked.

"Gratiot — Mrs. Gratiot," Thorsby replied.

"Ah!" Bandy knew of no Gratiots: he therefore could not tally the reunited husband and wife, as he always wanted to tally everybody and thing.

Hammond, coming out of a study that was rather blue than brown said, "Mr. Thorsby, as Bergh told you, my traveling kit held four horses, as fine flesh, sir, as ever trod on four feet." The Lieutenant looked at the speaker with interest. "Day before yesterday we were headed for Gathrie where what had looked like a clew to Lady Peggy had come from; it was twilight and the storm, you recall it?" Thorsby nodded. "At the in-end of a little cañon, and the wind sucking through it like a million penny whistles, and lightning, and thunder, my string close at the back of the machine, one groom mounted, when, nobody knows how, or who did it or by what means! but my Star Black was loosed, mounted under our noses, and somebody laughed in our faces. Then faster than the flash off he went with my best horse. Is that the sort of gentry you army chaps let roam 'round down this way?"

Thorsby smiled. "We've been hunting him as long as I've been here, Mr. Hammond. He's a will-o'-the-wisp."

"Oh, you know the scoundrel then?" Hammond exclaimed, pushing his chair back excitedly.

"Not intimately, sir; I know who he is; no one ever loots an animal that way but this one man. He can do it." Thorsby's emphasis was a credit to the horse thief.

"He can." Mr. Hammond coincided with unmistakable emphasis.

"What is his name?" Bandy of course asked the question.

"His name is Billy Birdsong. The Tucson Terror, for short," responded Thorsby.

"The Tucson Terror, eh? I'd like to have had a look at him. We've heard of him; we were warned against him everywhere we struck, up and down the country." Sterling balanced his spoon on his cup edge.

"Dare say, sir; Billy's a household word any old place along the border; he just runs over into Mexique, you see, with our horses, then he runs over here with the Mexican breed and there you are!" The Lieutenant laughed.

"I'd like to meet him on the square, and give and take chances!" Hammond spoke wrathfully.

"You never will, Mr. Hammond," was Thorsby's firm rejoinder.

"I've got three other nags almost as valuable as Star Black, Mr. Thorsby, out in the yard there." Hammond was ready and anxious to have the Tucson Terror try it again.

"The Terror never strikes the same iron twice; I wish you luck though. I've hunted him

up and down before now. Never in sight. Game's Billy's every time." Thorsby drained his cup.

Hammond pushed his chair farther back.
They all rose.

Thorsby said, "I'd like to present you, gentlemen, to the Colonel, and have you for luncheon at the Fort to-day if you will?"

"Thank you, Mr. Thorsby, immensely. We'd like nothing half so well, but there's a faint scrap of a rag of a clew to her ladyship a piece farther on toward the Border, and we feel that we must decline the pleasure, sir." Hammond spoke for the trio.

"Our best to the Colonel, Mr. Thorsby, and these," Bandy gave the Lieutenant three more cards, "and, when you and he strike little old New York, sir, we'll put you up, and give you the time of your life, and present you, we hope, to Lady Peggy de Bohun."

The three guardsmen went out into the yard to look over the machine and the animals; presently the Colonel himself rode into the yard; Judy saw him from her calico curtained window; he looked so grave that she did not tell Florida who had come.

Thorsby met his superior officer at the threshold; then Thorsby remembered Churchill's letter. He took it from his pocket and handed it to the Colonel.

"Sir, Captain Churchill requested me to hand you this, sir, this morning."

"Where is Gratiot?" growled the Colonel, slipping a knife blade from the table through the envelope. "Where is he, eh?"

"I don't know, sir," was Thorsby's quiet response.

"You ought to know, sir. There's been too much damned dilly-dallying over this business, anyway."

The Colonel unfolded the sheet, spread it out and read Churchill's letter.

There was a curious silence between them there in the shack parlor that had been mostly Lady Peggy's own reception room. It was only broken by the far-off chatter of the three guardsmen in the shed.

"You know the contents of this letter, sir?" the Colonel asked.

"No, sir, I do not."

"Are you sure, Mr. Thorsby?"

Thorsby started, recovered himself, stood at attention. "I am sure, sir."

"Read it." The Colonel handed the paper to the younger man.

Thorsby read it, his face flushing, his eyes flashing, his heart beating to burst. When his glance was at the bottom of the page, the Colonel watching narrowly, said,

"Well, sir?"

186 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

The Lieutenant folded the sheet and gave it back.

“ Well, sir ? ” thundered the Colonel again.

Thorsby stood like a rock.

“ Speak.” The commanding officer’s tone was muffled but determined.

CHAPTER XVIII

In which the Colonel orders that Captain Churchill, spy, shall be hunted, taken, court-martialed and shot.

"NOTHING to say, sir," was Thorsby's word.

"You ought to have, then." The Colonel was in a rage.

"No, sir; not to my superior officer, sir."

"Superior officer be hanged! Aren't you Churchill's friend?" The Colonel eyed his subordinate narrowly.

"Yes, sir, I am." Thorsby idolized Churchill and it spoke out in his speech.

"Why don't you say that this is a damned lie, then?" The Colonel's fist came down with Jack's letter in it on the table, causing every plate and spoon thereon to rattle.

Charley Thorsby looked his Colonel in the eye square, stepped up to him and put out his hand; the Colonel grasped it, and the breath of each came quickly.

"Why did Jack Churchill write this?" the Colonel asked, striking the envelope.

Young Thorsby's lips tightened.

"Speak as you would to your own father, my

boy." The martinet said it in a tone few of his men had ever heard.

"Well, sir," the Lieutenant's face relaxed. The Colonel sat down and touched a chair for Thorsby, who first went over and closed the door.

"Go ahead, and be quick about it."

"Mrs. Gratiot, sir, is Kent Gratiot's wife." The words came out from between Charley's teeth as if he were grinding them between mill-stones.

"The devil she is! I thought she was a widow." The Colonel rose as he spoke.

"She thought so herself, sir, until he turned up here, covered with mud and blood from the throw you heard of." Thorsby of course was on his feet, too.

"Well?" The older man uttered his monosyllable impatiently.

"Captain Churchill, sir, was very fond of Mrs. Gratiot and—I know nothing about it, sir; no word was exchanged between us, but it looks as if, to save the wife the disgrace and pain of her husband's capture and death, he had let the spy slip and—" Thorsby waved his hand toward the letter in the Colonel's hand.

"The woman of it always!" grimly came the sentence from the martinet's lips.

"The man of it, sir. Churchill gives his own life for her. She knows nothing of it, I'll guarantee." Thorsby spoke warmly.

"Oh, you will, eh?" queried the Colonel, eyeing him severely.

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Gratiot is an A 1 woman. She'd sooner die herself than have had this come around. She doesn't dream it."

"You like her, too, eh, or don't you?" The Colonel regarded his juvenile companion in arms with attention.

"Yes, sir, but I love someone else." Thorsby's mind was on that little freckle-faced girl to be sure.

The Colonel then sat still a few moments before he spoke.

"The campaign is this, Mr. Thorsby. Gratiot must be found, taken, tried, punished, wife or no wife; he's a scoundrel! Churchill will be disciplined, perhaps degraded if the whole story has to come out."

Thorsby walked across the room.

"Where is Captain Churchill?" the Colonel asked thoughtfully.

"Due here now, sir, I should say," was Thorsby's prompt rejoinder as he indicated the Captain's own letter.

"When did you see him last?" asked the Colonel.

"Yesterday."

"What time?"

"Eleven P. M., sir." Thorsby was sure of the hour.

"Where?"

"Right here."

"When did he leave here?"

"At that exact time, sir."

"For the Fort?"

"No, sir."

"Where then?"

Thorsby came over and sat down close to his superior officer, his two fists doubled up close, which was a way he had when controlling his feelings. "Well, sir, he thought he heard Mrs. Gratiot's voice calling him to come and help her, and he went."

There; he'd gotten it out and probably the Colonel would laugh at his story.

The older man stared hard at his companion; he didn't laugh at all. "Then he knew where she was?" he exclaimed.

"No, Colonel, he did not. He only knew that she had fled with Gratiot, sir."

"How long before Churchill went did Gratiot get away with his wife?"

"About two hours, sir."

"And Churchill thought he heard her call through that storm, two hours' ride away?" The older man's tone was full of amazement, but it held no touch of a sneer.

"Yes, sir." Thorsby sighed as he replied.

"Possibly Churchill won't come back to meet what's coming to him, to meet his dues? eh,

sir?" The Colonel spoke musingly and tentatively.

"Colonel!" Thorsby sprang to his feet.

"He must be found," the martinet said harshly.

"He'll come, sir, no fear." Thorsby was faithful to the last drop of his blood.

"Take ten men out, and find him. Start ahead on it." There was no mistaking that manner. Thorsby had heard it before.

"When, sir?" he respectfully inquired.

"Now."

Thorsby went to the door and was about to salute when the Colonel added.

"One moment; this is the game. You're out after Churchill, the spy."

"But, sir, must it come out publicly that way?" The Lieutenant adventured a wholly unprofessional question in his bitter anxiety.

The Colonel looked him over until he felt the blood surge up into his face.

"I beg pardon, sir!" The young man acknowledged his error contritely enough, to be sure.

The superior officer nodded rather indulgently and proceeded with, "Corporal Bates and twenty men go out in search of Gratiot, *sub rosa*, you understand? Your men and you are the cover to the real game. Gratiot's to be taken dead or alive; married or single."

Thorsby sighed in relief as he grasped the orders in their entirety.

"Very well, sir."

"Don't let me see you again until you fetch Churchill with you, Mr. Thorsby, do you hear?"

"Very well, sir."

A horn tooted in the yard just at that moment. The Colonel crossed to the window.

"Who are these people?" he asked impatiently.

"Three New York men on a hunting expedition." Thorsby was truthful. "They carry a machine, horses, and a dirigible. Billy Birdsong got away with their best nag yesterday," he added by way of the latest local news.

"Did? We'll round up Billy yet! What are these chaps hunting? They're not dressed or equipped for that sort of thing; besides there's no game here," the Colonel said gruffly and with the suspicion that always lurks in a man in the Service when he's on border duty.

"No, sir, so they seem to have discovered," was Thorsby's very timely and truthful reply.

"Hold on! Do you know them?" the senior officer inquired sharply.

"Yes, sir, I do, in a sense; I had breakfast with them this morning; they're a jolly lot. I know their names well by reputation. They are New York men of position and breeding."

The Colonel drew in and laid two fingers on Thorsby's arm. "Are they kiting around the country? Are they good talkers?"

"Yes, sir, they are. All of them, very able talkers, bright, amusing, unusual chaps. Their shells are brittle, but the meat is good stuff."

"Go out there and give 'em the news. Tell them you're off on a flying hunt yourself after Captain Churchill, a spy and a traitor; that he's going to be found, taken, shot." The Colonel spoke with vivacious zeal.

Thorsby's head dropped.

"Go, sir," bellowed the Colonel. "If you want the real criminal to be caught, lay it on thick for the blind. For I tell you, my boy, Gratiot's going to get acquainted with lead, or my name isn't what it is by —"

"I see, sir." Thorsby saluted, went out, and in five minutes had imparted his news with all the vim and fire the Colonel could have demanded. As that officer crossed the yard on his own mount, a few minutes later, Thorsby was bidding his new friends a hasty good-by after this fashion:

"I hope you'll bag the Tucson Terror, gentlemen, before you're much older, and find your lost lady!"

"We hope you'll bag Captain Churchill, the spy, sir, before sun-up to-morrow. If we're anywhere at hand we'll be pleased to drop down for

194 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

the shoot!" Hammond responded with vast cordiality and earnestness.

The three guardsmen saluted as the two officers, for Thorsby on his pony now joined his Colonel, cantered out of the yard.

CHAPTER XIX

In which the Captain finds the laced and beribboned garments of her ladyship in the ice-box of Walsh's shack.

JACK CHURCHILL, as he rode deep into the cactus, after saying what he had to her ladyship, was determined to get back to the Fort and give himself up as fast as he could; but even with this resolve there came to him the agonized terror at his heartstrings of, where is Peggy after all? What knowledge of her had he really gained? Save that he had seen Gratiot ride off alone with the two ponies? At Walsh's she must still be, secreted maybe, must be; and with that pack of men in the shack! he to go and leave even such a possibility behind him!

It could not be done.

The Captain therefore stuck close in the cactus near the shack.

He figured it out, now that he was alone, that that young Barkeep must know where Mrs. Gratiot was, so much was clear; the boy had quibbled a bit all through his questioning: a stupid boy, but after all, what a brick! That slim, tall, little Barkeep had picked the Tucson Terror off his pins as

neatly as a thing of that kind could be done; that slim Barkeep had saved Churchill's life; had dared all things to do it; had sung out to him "the lady you're lookin' for, may be lookin' for you somewhere too." There was cheer and comfort somehow in the atmosphere and speech of Barkeep.

What an infernal ass he had been not to stick to the Barkeep! Of course the boy had seen Mrs. Gratiot at the shack; had maybe helped her to some sort of disguise, and place of safety. The cellar, the hay-mow, heaven knows what or where!

Jack, at this crisis in his mental struggles, guided his mount out of the cactus, but warily enough; he'd follow the Barkeep, and make him tell what he knew.

The cleared path once gained, it was something of a riddle to select which way the boy had taken. It must have been the opposite from the route he himself had chosen, since no living creature, Jack was sure, had passed the cactus as long as he had been tied up in there. So the Captain turned his mare's head, and, taking well into account a very possible meeting with the renowned Mr. Birdsong or some of his pals, also the fact that he himself remained unarmed, proceeded on a long lope southward. Presently an urge of his spurs, won him a gallop, then a run; at last breaking into a wild tear to catch up with the Barkeep who must, would, should, give him news of Peggy's whereabouts.

And what must come thereafter?

The Fort and the bullets.

To be sure.

But first, her safety: first to be positive that Peggy was in no danger.

On, on, his nag's long, fine neck outstretched, blood on her nostrils, blood at her flanks, foam at her mouth and more bubbling under her saddle.

Up this hill, and down that slope; over the narrow chasm where bridges used to be, through this boiling stream, up this mount, around a curve as sharp as a serpent's tooth, and then without premonition the Captain almost landed himself in a big machine.

"Hello!" came briskly from the three guardsmen in alarmed remonstrance.

"Hello!" came from the Captain, who reined in the mare on her haunches in such form as caused Hammond's eyes to glisten.

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen, but I'm on the hunt for a slim, young chap in a tattered uniform, on a fine mount; have you seen him, may I ask?"

"No, not a soul, sir," Hammond replied courteously.

"Not even a rabbit," added Sterling with interest and an inquiring eye as well.

"Is it the spy you're after, sir?" This was Bandy of course asking. "Beg pardon, but seeing your cap, don't you know, I judge you're an army

man, and we're just from Punty's shack at Fort McHenry, and —"

"I'm not after the spy, sir; it's a mere lad, a stripling. What's the news at the Fort, may I ask?" Churchill was wiping the mare's ears and neck with his handkerchief.

"An elopement; I suppose you know that though, a charming widow, and a Mr. Gratiot, I believe," Bandy gave the news with zest.

"Oh, I see," the Captain smiled quite as if he knew all about the affair, which by the by, he did!

"But they're out hot for the spy, that rascally Churchill. Thorsby, you know Thorsby, sir?" Bandy did the asking.

"I know Thorsby well," the soldier-man answered quickly.

"Well, he's out now with ten men scouring the country after Churchill. I am surprised at a man with his record, sir, doing such a job as the map-selling business to the Japs." This was from Sterling, who was regarding the horseman with admiration notwithstanding his rather unkempt appearance.

The Captain shrugged his shoulders.

"It seems unlike what I know of Churchill," the Captain remarked carelessly, as he went on flicking the mare and coaxing her.

"Oh, do you know him too?" Bandy asked with undisguised interest.

The Captain nodded, "Oh, yes. I know Churchill very well indeed." Then after a moment's pause he added, "May I ask how far along back there's a turn-off? Do any of you happen to remember?"

They all remembered that there was no turn-off back at least forty miles. The chauffeur too was more than positive on this score.

So they saluted the rider and went on in their car.

Churchill sat still in his saddle for a moment and considered.

It had been an odd sensation to hear himself discussed; but what of all that when, gnawing at his very soul, was the blank uncertainty about Peggy?

Before he went to the Fort he must know of her. He scanned the land, shading his eyes with his hand, but the land made no reply.

The Barkeep had evidently not taken either one of the two roads; then the Barkeep must have done one of two other things: He had gone into the cactus, or he had gone back to Walsh's.

After a few more minutes of thinking it over, Churchill struck it hard for Walsh's.

It was not very long before he discerned the little tumbled-down chimney of the hotel itself; the rows of small calico curtained windows; a thin streak of smoke curling up from the dislocated bricks; and also he saw the birdhouse on

top of the stable shack, and the testy weather-vane waving to the east.

When he reached the edge of the yard along back by the trellis, the whole place was in profound silence; not a sound; not a horse in the stable, as he easily saw through the wide open doors near the yard; there were trickles of fresh blood on the steps, though, and, yes! to be sure, here was a sign of life; the cat came forward, arching her back to greet him, purring hopefully, blinking her topaz eyes and rubbing her head against his legs, as he went up the steps and laid his hand upon the latch. Puss and he entered together to find the place deserted.

The fire in the stove smoldered dully.

There was no human being in evidence.

Churchill went up to the second story, rushed in and out of the three rooms and the one pantry. Searching, seeking, the Captain and the cat, but not finding. Then he made a soft and reluctant treading into and across the big room towards the calico alcove where he had seen her lying.

Jack drew those curtains together with a fierce grip, and then he ran with a plunge down to the little cellar; puss in hot pursuit.

It was damp, gruesome, and dark, a clammy place, with its mud floor and its lean skurrying rats after whom puss scampered.

He struck match after match, peering around the eerie underground environment.

He called "Peggy" very softly, then louder; then he shouted her name at the top of his lungs, but only pitiful echoes came back to answer him.

In discouragement he then went up to the kitchen; inspected everything to the very wood-box; then over to the stables; up in the hay-loft; peeping into the mangers; scanning the trellis, searching the roof.

No one was anywhere. Nothing was palpable at Walsh's but the unbroken silence and the pussycat at his heels wherever he went.

Jack came back into the shack in despair.

The cat meowed; then she slipped over to the ice-box in the entry opposite the barroom, and began scratching at the knob of the little door vigorously.

The Captain saw the cat, and it even passed through his brain that the animal had instinct and memory both; that it probably knew from experience that in the ice-box the milk and meat were kept, and usually came from.

Puss meowed lustily on, scratching the harder, even turned an appealing puss-visage around upon her companion.

So, mechanically, Churchill went over, opened the ice-box door, and thrust in his hand, expecting, with the cat, to draw out food.

Instead, his fingers encountered the feel of cloth; and he hastily pulled out, what?

Peg's hat, skirt and jacket, and some dainty lace beribboned petticoats.

Horror was tingling in every ounce of Churchill's blood as he thrust in his hand again, then thrust in his head, then lighted matches, stared far into the depths and recesses of the insensate ice-box.

Nothing more was in that ice-box.

Then, struck almost to the death, the soldier-man went up and down again and again, through the empty shack, calling, imploring, seeking some further trace of my Lady Peggy.

None was there. All was a blank, without further clue than the garments found in the ice-box.

Has she been murdered?

She must have been.

What other cause could have fetched her clothes to such a hiding-place?

Who had killed her?

Gratiot.

Why?

God alone knew.

Where now lay her sweet and beautiful body?

Churchill was as near insane as sane men get: and he was a very sane man, level-headed, of a fine balance; his own position was about as unusual a one as often falls to the lot of humanity, and the two primal elements made within him as fierce and tough a battle as he had ever fought.

His honor and his word were at stake for his prompt return to Fort McHenry; he knew well enough that every moment of delay made in giving himself up told against him too heavily; his love of the woman, his manhood, his absolute soul, was involved in the finding of Peggy, alive or dead.

If he went back to the Fort and reported the whole story, would he not implicate not only Mrs. Gratiot herself, but defeat his own sacrifice as well, by exposing Gratiot to capture as a murderer, if indeed Peggy were dead? In any event, a rehearsal of any part of his seeking and finding and losing of Mrs. Gratiot, must cast reflections of one kind or another upon her, and upon the man whose name she bore.

Clearly, whatever the soldier-man elected to do, must be done otherwise than by way of a revelation of his chase after Peggy, nor could he seek assistance in his hunt!

He sat down before the dingy stove in the kitchen, his head bowed in his hands, as forlorn a picture of a man as ever had been seen. He questioned God, Fate and himself, and his bearings. Was there a living soul to whom he could turn?

Yes: one person there was who could assist him. That young Barkeep.

Churchill sprang to his feet. It all resolved itself down, as a matter of hard fact, to the slim

lad who had so nimbly and aptly saved the Captain's own life not so many hours ago.

The Barkeep must be found. This conclusion, identical with a former one, was all that Churchill got hold of as he stood benumbed in the shack kitchen, holding Peggy's still damp garments in his arms, while the insistent cat purred gently at his side; she had found a pot of butter with the cover off, and was no longer meowing.

Churchill tied up Peg's clothes in a parcel, using her jacket sleeves for a string; he went out to the shed; fed his mare and watered her; took a big draft himself, with some brandy from the bar. Then he strapped Peggy's clothes back under his saddle, and with a salute to the upper window of the room he had last seen her in, the very room, too, at whose threshold he had talked to the young Barkeep, the Captain made off from Walsh's shack, facing for the border, south, towards Catspaw!

CHAPTER XX

In which the three guardsmen meet her ladyship on the road and tell her they know who she is

VERY shortly after the Colonel and the Lieutenant rode out of Punty's yard, the three guardsmen were driving out too, heading south. One of their correspondents down along the Border, about twenty miles only from Mexico City, had 'phoned up to them early, *via* Gathrie, that a lady had passed the hotel at Granny Forks in the mail coach; that the coach was piled high with trunks bearing European and New York labels. That nobody could see the lady's face, for she was heavily veiled, but her air was sprightly, and her speech was English. She was, she said, going to Catspaw to take the train for Mexico, but the odds were that she'd never board a car bound in that direction, for the firing was getting stiff to the southwards, and ladies were not being let over loose on Mexican territory just then.

Nevertheless, the trio, well knowing her ladyship's very intrepid and utterly original methods of dealing with other people's "don'ts" and "shall nots," quickly decided that if this veiled lady were Peggy, and if Peggy wanted to cross

the line, and reach Mexico, she'd reach it in spite of all the firing and all the shall nots that might be hurled at her purpose.

Therefore they started south; they likewise put on all force; kicked the levers, let her go; and go she did, over the worst roads any car had ever traveled yet.

Bump, thump; groan, creak; grind, clank; up, down; in water and out; mount hill, dip vale; but notwithstanding all the buzz and clatter, the men could, of course, talk; high above the rumble and remonstrance of the machine, their triumvirate of lungs kept it up.

They chatted of Thorsby, of the odd Gratiot elopement, of Captain Churchill, whom they knew by repute as a gallant officer bearing an unblemished and splendid record, from the Philippines, from San Juan, and from back in South Africa as a free lance for England.

"It is incomprehensible to me how a man like that should have turned traitor!" Sterling exclaimed warmly as they were jolted along.

"There was money in it," said Bandy tersely as he lighted a fresh cigarette.

"Money!" roared Hammond angrily. "Why, old chap, Churchill has money to buy Japan with; he's a very rich man. Didn't you know that?"

"No: is he? Well, even so; then depend upon it," responded Mr. Bandeleur Bergh with

a wag of his head, "it's a girl. No living chap ever did any such fool act, sir, unless it was for money, or for a girl!"

At precisely which juncture, as it happened, in the conversation, the Captain, as has been related, came very near landing himself and his mount on top of the car and its contents.

The talk that ensued between the travelers has also been rehearsed some pages back, also the fact that the Captain had left the guardsmen to proceed as fast as they wanted to, in their direction, while he put spurs for his own personal goal, ruminating as he had covered the ground, upon the strange pranks fortune sometimes plays with the most of us.

"That was a good looking party, wasn't he?" Hammond remarked, lighting his weed from Bandy's spark.

Bandy nodded. "Why in thunder didn't I ask him his name!" Mr. Bergh spoke with profound regret, adding, "You'd oblige me, Ham, if we meet any more interesting-looking strangers, by giving me a chance to make a few polite inquiries."

Mr. Hammond retorted, "I was surprised at your letting an interrogation point escape you, Bandy. You had your chance."

"I never did it before," Mr. Bergh sadly retorted, "and of course I regret it now that I have."

"You certainly never have," Sterling broke out with cheerfully.

"He's after a lad, a slim person he said, we know that much anyway." Mr. Bergh's emphasis was all for self-consolement.

"Shut up, can't you!" Hammond cried out irately. "Unless one of us has something to suggest about Peggy or her whereabouts, suppose we hold our tongues, for a change." His eye was placed upon Mr. Bergh in no covert disapproval.

"I think we'll round up her ladyship at Cats-paw, or along the Border somewhere." Bandy was smoking in a leisurely fashion, despite the fury of their pace, and his tone was one of complacent faith.

"Oh, now, do you?" Sterling ironically exclaimed. "Such a lot you must know about the pleasures and attractions of Border travel about this season, with guns bristling and plenty of desperadoes carrying on like devils; just the place and season that would naturally possess the most powerful magnets for any girl."

"Peggy wouldn't mind all that a bit," returned Bandy with conviction.

"She might not mind if there was any point to the game, I agree with you," Sterling jerked out testily, "but her ladyship's not idiotic enough to risk all she'd have to risk, by any such jaunt

as down Mexico way just now. That's sense, Bandy, my boy."

"Hold on, Sterling; what point to the game could she possibly have?" Bandy inquired breathlessly; his fellow traveler had evidently opened up new vistas of apprehension to his mind in connection with the volatile girl they were seeking.

"A man," was Hammond's curt response.

"'A man!'" gasped Mr. Bergh. "How? What do you mean?"

"I mean if a man she cared about was in any danger, or trouble, and her ladyship's going to hell could help him, I believe she'd take the trip, that's what I mean, Bandy," replied Mr. Hammond. "Wouldn't she?" He turned his goggles squarely upon his two companions, first one side, then the other, for Mr. Hammond was the filling to the back seat sandwich.

Both the other guardsmen sighed deeply and said, "Yes, she would."

"Sure." Hammond puffed the assurance of his proposition way up in the air in rings of blue Turkish smoke.

Bandy presently added reflectively, "Who do you think, now, the man might be?" His round face, quite afame with the exhilarations not only of fifty miles an hour but of a new aspect of Peggy, shone with curiosity.

"The Lord alone knows," was the pious rejoinder of Mr. Hammond.

"She's so damned nice to the whole crowd that no one can give a guess," remarked Sterling in a low tone.

"Do you think," Bandy asked, "that her ladyship could have gone off, eloped you know, with someone, when she left town?" His blue goggles wig-wagged from one of his mates to the other and the same juvenile expression still played upon his visage.

"There was no one missing, old man," Sterling replied conclusively.

"That's true," Mr. Bergh allowed, relapsing into his weed.

"Do you remember the day she left, or rather that evening when the whole bunch of us, her bunch, I mean, were lined up to a man at the Metropolitan Club to thrash it out?" inquired Sterling. "No one was absent. We were all there."

"Yes," coincided Hammond gloomily.

"But, you see," Bandy was evidently pursuing a personally conducted theory of his own, "couldn't it have been possible that her ladyship might, you know, have met and cared for some chap we had none of us, ever seen?" He slipped his goggles quite off now, exposing an expression as of one who has made an important and remarkable discovery.

"Don't be a fool, Bandy!" exclaimed Sterling irately.

"He can't help it, Sterling," soothed Mr. Hammond. "Look here," turning his own goggles upon Mr. Bergh and using a really severe tone. "If Vesuvius can be fetched over here in a hand satchel and set up for a show, then Lady Peggy de Bohun may have been able to keep up an acquaintance, run away with, and be married to, some man we three have never seen. But, as Vesuvius hasn't yet come over in any such vehicle, I don't think her ladyship has been able to elude our united, unflinching, daily, hourly endeavors to keep ourselves in her mind." Mr. Sterling let fall his goggles too and took the gale in his eyes manfully enough.

"True," it was lugubriously said, then Bandy added with a flash of mournful triumph, "but she left town all the same, and not one of the three of us knew she was going, or where, or when, or why, she went! So there! for all our watching united, unflinching, etc., etc."

"We'll find out though," Hammond stoutly exclaimed.

"It's no other man," came vehemently from Bandy as he snapped to his tobacco case with a will.

"We'll see," Sterling spoke uncertainly.

"If it were either of you boys," Mr. Bergh

said in low muffled tones, "I might stand for it; but an outsider, I couldn't!" Bandy replaced his goggles after wiping the dust and moisture from his pink and rounded face.

Hammond surveyed him.

"It's a great pity she couldn't see you now!" he said feelingly to Mr. Bergh.

"Why?" inquired Mr. Bergh alertly.

"Oh, no matter," with a disquieting grin over at Sterling.

"Is the bridge of my nose very black?" asked Mr. Bergh.

"Yes, it is," was the blithe rejoinder of the two masculine voices.

"And my eyes? What about them? eh?"

"They are red."

"And my ears?" pursued poor Bandy in alarm.

"They are the same color, sir, only a far deeper shade," was the consoling response of Mr. Hammond.

"Look here, Ham, you're the best looking of us, I know," Bandy said after a slight pause; "I'm not in it for beauty with either of you chaps, but somehow, I seem to fancy her ladyship would like me best, if she'd only give herself a chance; I mean, you know, give me a chance to do things." The innocent optimism and self-esteem of Mr. Bergh were too entertaining to be treated with harshness.

"What things, for instance?" demanded Sterling severely.

"Why, I don't exactly know," Bandy went on plaintively but with complete coolness; "hold her hands, or kiss them, for instance, or send her pretty things, or take her to theatres without her chaperone, and all that, you see?" His voice argued a real reliance on the methods he had catalogued. Mr. Bergh was not a fool at all but he was inapt at feminine warfare.

"Look here!" Hammond sighed deeply after a silence. "Boys, perhaps we're a three of idiots kiting around the land, looking for a girl that never gave one of us, for all Bandy's impudence, a show. Are we idiots or are we not?" Mr. Hammond squared around and eyed each of the others.

"You're a traitor, that's what you are!" Sterling spoke first and quite authoritatively. "When we three banded together one year ago, and agreed that our hearts and minds were fixed upon her ladyship, and that we'd never any of us give her up, until she introduced us to her husband; we agreed, too, that it was fine and good, and decent, that the twentieth-century would have to own up to such a three of chaps as we are. All the world's claiming that the society man's rotten; they say that real romance and chivalry are dead and buried; they claim that women aren't worth while; and that men are not worth women. We,

214 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

set out to disprove it. We're society men; all we've ever been good for, besides our trip to the pole and our flying the largest car, up to meeting her ladyship, was holding up parlor doors, leading cotillions and doing the fool stunt at all the functions we were asked to; dining, drinking, gambling. She's made men of us; she put it into our heads to show ourselves, if we never show anyone else, that chivalry isn't dead, and that three New York boys, college-bred, and about as fool as they make them, can be game and true; the whole blessed bunch together; for a girl's sake."

"Hear! hear! hear!" and Sterling's two hands were clasped by his companions.

Bandy said, "Old man, you're right. I didn't mean —"

At which crisis Mr. Hammond's grasp gripped so hard that even Bandy stopped short.

"Look at that!" cried out Mr. Hammond. They both looked.

At what?

At her ladyship on the Star Black steed she had stolen, reining in, as she and they advanced toward each other, the horse and the machine.

"My Star Black, by thunder!" cried Hammond, who was out with his guns, one in each hand, before either of the others had found their tongues.

"Steady now, Tippet," he whispered to the

chauffeur. "Stop her. Whip out your pistols, too."

The machine came to a dead standstill as each of the four occupants held, pointing at her ladyship, a brace of revolvers of the best and latest Colt make.

"Halt on your life!"

From Hammond, Sterling, bare-faced Bandy, and the chauffeur.

Her ladyship halted. She certainly did!

Incongruous to relate, at that instant, with Bandeleur Bergh's rotund countenance in her eye, her largest desire was to laugh; and close second to this, as she felt the parcel of her shorn tresses working its way from her inside pocket, a thrill of terror lest it should tumble to the ground.

"We know who you are," said Mr. Hammond blandly, which emphasis he could easily permit himself, considering the arms at his command. **Four to one, isn't a bad advantage.**

CHAPTER XXI

*In which the supposed Tucson Terror is brought to bay
and informed that his hour has at last come*

"WE know who you are!" Was it all to end this way? Caught, trapped; snared in trousers and jacket, astride; shorn of her hair; dirty, bedraggled; by her three guardsmen. In the flash of time it took her to have this thought, Mr. Bergh reiterated the announcement: "We know who you are."

Did they?

Her ladyship had forgot her locks and her laughter both.

Did they indeed recognize her?

She made no reply, unless an almost imperceptible raise of her left shoulder intended to keep the parcel in its place, could be so construed.

It was evidently so parsed, for Sterling quickly ejaculated, "Don't stir, or you're a goner."

Her ladyship kept her shoulder raised, and sat breathless, palpitating, on her beast.

"You're Billy Birdsong," said Hammond decisively. "Oh, we know!"

How her ladyship's heart bumped into relief!

Better, far better at this time, to be mistaken for a Tucson Terror, than to be detected for herself.

"Do you?" she rejoined in the low, rough voice which she had so cleverly assumed with her man's clothes.

"We think we do." This from Bandy in a soft and amiable tone. "Aren't you Billy Bird-song?"

"That's for you to say, gents. Anyhow," she added in an angry tone, "what are you four holding me up for here on the road? What do you want?" Peggy thrust her left hand inside her jacket desperately, determined that the parcel should not discover itself; she was making to ram it down her sleeve when Hammond cried out:

"Steady! none of that!" they all four still covered her ladyship with their weapons.

Peg drew out her empty left hand, having succeeded in tucking the tresses successfully down into the padded sleeve.

"I ain't left-handed," she remarked with an attempt at a smile. "And here's my iron." She pulled out the Captain's pistol, and held it up before their eyes. "I ain't such a fool as to be fightin' four fellers at once. See?" She fired in the air before they could budge, and then looking at them, she added, "Now, pards, what do you want?" Her tone was level, square, up-

218 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

right and utterly without fear or even apprehension.

"That's my horse you're up on," Hammond told her succinctly.

"Is it? Well, it's a fine animal," was the as succinct rejoinder from Lady Peggy.

"You stole it." Mr. Hammond proceeded threateningly.

"Did I?" inquired her ladyship quizzically as she patted the black's neck.

"Didn't you?" put in Bandy wide-eyed as usual.

"Yes, I did." She spoke matter-of-factly and with a certain cheerfulness.

"Then you are Billy Birdsong," Mr. Bergh exclaimed conclusively, "for at Fort McHenry, Lieutenant Thorsby told us there was but one man in the country who could get away with a horse, under people's eyes, in the way you got away with that one."

"Did he, now?" ejaculated the supposititious Birdsong.

"Mr. Birdsong, we take off our hats to you, but the hour has come when you've got to do as we say. Dismount."

Hammond spoke, but all four kept their guns leveled suspiciously at my Lady Peggy's much discolored, very dirty face.

She slipped quickly to the ground, contriving to keep her left arm, however, close to her side,

although the pistols of the guardsmen and the chauffeur were always obligingly pointed entirely her way.

"Now, Tippet," Hammond went on, "I think it's quite in order for you to relieve Mr. Birdsong of the further care of Star Black. Just tie him behind the car for the present. I'll mount him myself when we start on."

Tippet, however, seemed somewhat loath to abandon his irons, and he even ventured to suggest, in an awestruck minor tone, that Mr. Birdsong might have more than one pistol disposed about his person.

"Quite wise of you, Tippet." Sterling, who had been listening to Tippet, then addressed himself to Lady Peggy. She stood leaning nonchalantly against the horse she had been up on; the rope was still in her grasp. "Now, Birdsong, empty your pockets," was what Mr. Sterling said.

Her ladyship held on to the halter, but she laid her gun on the ground.

"I ain't got no more guns," she said bluntly.

Her ladyship would like to have swooned, given in, and wept had she been of the swooning variety, as she recalled all that those pockets of hers contained.

"'Pon my honor," she continued, then the humor of the Tucson Terror's honor struck her quite as forcibly as it did the others; it was an

uneasy pause that she made, but it was filled by Mr. Bergh in this fashion.

"Well, Mr. Birdsong, honor isn't exactly in your line, you see, and there being a price on your head, and so forth, we —"

"Is there?" A price on her head! Her ladyship had not counted on any such imposing attention as this.

"To be sure. Has been any time the past five years, and you know it, Birdsong, you know you do!" Mr. Sterling was the spokesman.

"Have I been at it as long as that?" she asked reminiscently.

It is to be believed that her ladyship's spirits would have played with Fate up to the cracking-point of doom.

"It seems so. Now, Birdsong," Bandy then took up the conversational thread. "We feel that there'd be more life insurance for us if you just conform to this gentleman's," indicating Mr. Sterling, "wishes, and turn all your pockets inside out, before our eyes;" with which Bandy brought his own brace of weapons more ostensibly to bear upon her ladyship than before even.

In a flash, with the halter on her wrist, Peg thought, "Can I jump on this horse and get away without their shooting me dead, or can I not?"

She looked up! The sun shone full and glistening on the smart array of the eight ominous guns.

"What" (she even smiled at her word-play), "was one horse against that many Colts."

It was to give in.

Not wholly?

By no means. Not Lady Peggy de Bohun, descendant of Lady Peggy Burgoyne; oh, no; not wholly.

She must simply allow herself to be accounted a thief of other commodities than horse-flesh. And as to what they intended to do with her?

Her ladyship also allowed that that must take care of itself; and that she would endure anything to reach Punty's, and a proximity to Jack Churchill. That was the sum total of her mind as she stood there in front of the guardsmen, quite forgetful and oblivious that when they should find her jewels they would recognize them.

She thrust her hands into her trousers pockets, and drew from one the buckskin bag in which she kept a few of her diamond trinkets, those she was fondest of and oftenest used; from the other, the strip she had torn from the sheet at Walsh's, and strung with the beautiful rings she habitually wore. These last sparkled in the sunshine, varying very prettily with the revolvers on the opposite side of the road.

"Go on," commanded Hammond, staring at his first catch of a highwayman with considerable natural curiosity.

Her ladyship shook her head; she would make

222 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

one try at holding back the miniature of her ancestress, the first Lady Peggy; that lady lay at the bottom of the right-hand pocket.

"Turn them all inside out, Mr. Birdsong," recommended Sterling in the voice of no appeal.

"You see," supplemented Bandy, "we can't afford to take chances with anyone as renowned as the Tucson Terror; that's what they call you, don't they?"

Peg nodded, but she did not turn both pockets inside out; she only turned one; revealing nothing else than a broken pipe, a wad of tobacco and a corkscrew; intimate possessions, doubtless, of the late departed incumbent of the trousers.

"The other pocket, Mr. Birdsong," insisted Sterling.

It was a leisurely skit to these men: they rather enjoyed it, to tell the truth; saving Tippet, who was white up to his eyes, and shivering as if with an ague. None of them had ever been introduced to a horse thief, or indeed any sort of thief, and to have bagged the Tucson Terror, the panic of the Border for some long time back, struck the fancy of the trio quite pleasantly. It was some time since they had had much of an excitement. The South Pole was a back number already.

Her ladyship, somehow, just then, was stub-

bornly impressed in the very teeth even of pistols, not to give up the miniature. She remembered things she had before forgotten; she feared Bandy would recognize it; she had worn it frequently; and if he did recognize it, the mental connection between Mr. Birdsong and her own self, might eventuate in some sort of disastrous way for her disguise.

So she said, "See here, you fellers; I ain't got nothing more. What are you going to do with me? Just do it, and have done with it."

"The other pocket, Mr. Birdsong," Hammond's emphasis was final.

Then Lady Peggy turned the other pocket wrong side out; the miniature of Lady Peggy the first, fell to the ground.

"Now, take off your jacket, Mr. Birdsong," persisted Mr. Hammond.

Her ladyship, with feminine art and a prayer for help, slipped her left arm out of its sleeve, managing to leave in it the precious parcel; then the right one was shed jauntily enough; the jacket fell on the ground too; and her ladyship was standing before them in the dead man's trousers and her very own shirt waist (a mannish thing suited to the habit she had worn when she rode out of Punty's to show Kent Gratiot the way of escape). The shirt was mud-stained, coffee-stained, damp, dabbled, collarless and torn; she

presented indeed, with her soiled and haggard face, her unkempt curly locks, a forlorn and dejected picture.

The three guardsmen, each discreetly retaining one gun, now got out of their car. Tippet warily approached her ladyship from the flank rear, timorously seized the halter, led the stolen animal round, and tethered it to the machine; also taking up, with his gun always in hand, a position of safety there himself.

As the three men approached her, Peggy raised her hand. "Say, you've got all I have on me, let me get away into the cactus, won't you, now? There's the loot! Give a chap a chance, eh?" She ventured to pick up the jacket.

Hammond looked at Sterling, and Peggy saw a hint of acquiescence in their four gleaming eyes.

"You don't want no blood money; you ain't that sort; let me quit, won't you?" she asked.

"Well, I," Hammond looked at Sterling and both sought Bandy's concurrence.

"You got the horse, and the joolry, and my gun, what do you want of me? Nothin'. Say, let me get back into the cactus, won't you?" she spoke with the dogged high voice of the unlettered and the down-and-out.

"Well, I suppose," Sterling began, when Bandy Bergh, who had picked up the string of rings, fairly shrieked out,

"Hold on, boys! Don't let him stir!"

CHAPTER XXII

In which the guardsmen obtain Lady Peggy's jewels, and with this clue decline to part company from Mr. Birdsong; until they shall learn from him the whereabouts of Lady Peggy herself

Of course the other two guardsmen put their guns into a hasty commission, while Lady Peggy stood looking at them coolly, calmly. To her it seemed that this might presently be the ignoble end of her miserable masquerade.

Bandy beckoned his companions to him.

"Look!" He held the strip of torn linen up before their eyes.

They looked.

"These are Lady Peggy's rings!" he cried out.

"Lady Peggy's rings!" Hammond caught his breath.

"Peggy's rings!" Sterling's apprehensions for her ladyship in connection with this cutthroat fellow in their hold, spoke in his voice.

The chorus broke ecstatically, wonderingly, with mingled emphasis, upon her ladyship's ears.

"And boys! Look again!" Bandy had by this, retrieved the miniature of the first Lady

226 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

Peggy, while Sterling had done as much by the buckskin bag.

"The portrait of Lady Peggy the first, done by Angelica Kauffman in the reign of George Third!" Bandy shouted with exultation, as he held it up to their gaze.

"And," opening the little buckskin bag, Mr. Sterling also contributed his quota, "her ladyship's favorite trinkets! Gad, boys! what a find!"

"The luck is ours, for sure," from Bandy.

Lady Peggy agreed mentally that it looked as if it were theirs.

They actually, such was the oneness of their sentiments, locked arms and fairly danced for joy, calling on Tippet for the cognac flask, with which to emphasize the occasion.

And there stood her ladyship, a forlorn, patient, singular, slim figure; rather hopeless: What she thought of was just, Jack Churchill.

In their triumph they had forgotten her.

Bandy remembered first, and handing her a flask, said, "Birdsong, here's to you. Take it from me, you've done us all an immense favor. Your head is your own. No price could buy it from us now, eh, boys?"

Both the others shook their own heads vehemently in hearty wholesale acquiescence.

"Tippet, get out the hamper. We'll have our luncheon right here," Mr. Hammond spoke

jubilantly, "and Mr. Birdsong will do us the pleasure, I am sure?"

She was almost ready to faint with hunger; she was quivering with terrified anxiety; her brain was, as has been said, all for the Captain and how to reach the goal where she might show herself to him as she was truly; yet Lady Peggy still could discern the tremendous atticism of the entire situation. Besides, her fund of ready common sense had always been equal to anything; therefore, it was now; and she inclined her head, recollecting too that Sterling was always a good provider on a tour; that food was needful to her; and that, once fed, she stood a possible better chance of being able to walk her way, if they were so amiable as to let her start at all.

Indeed, she thought to herself, what object could the three comrades possibly have in retaining her, now that they had secured all that she had possessed?

None, she was positive.

While Tippet, who religiously kept his face most ceremoniously and carefully turned towards the supposed horse thief, laid the cloth upon the cushions, and disposed his china, glass, silver and viands to the best advantage, Bandy Bergh talked; Hammond and Sterling also talked; and her ladyship talked too!

Actually she did.

This is what they said, Mr. Bergh opening the

engagement with an ill-concealed precipitancy, in this fashion:

"Now, Birdsong, how did you acquire these jewels and this miniature?" In fact, Bandy's air was quite judicial.

Her ladyship made no immediate answer, therefore Mr. Hammond saw fit to supplement Bandy's question by saying: "You see, the lady to whom these things belong is a very especial friend of ours, Birdsong, and,"

"Then," Lady Peggy took heart of grace to interrupt him, "if she is, you've got her things, and I'd like to get back to my own plot of land." She made a motion as she spoke.

"Not yet, Birdsong; slow up," exclaimed Sterling. "We told you we were indebted to you; we are. We intend to be more so," the emphasis was unmistakably indicative of a fruitful future.

"I ain't got nothing more." Her ladyship's tone was firm, although, it is true, she keenly and physically felt the possibilities of the parcel's slipping leash.

"Yes, you have," Bandy asserted warmly.

"I ain't," with indignation the words came from Lady Peggy's weary lips.

"Oh, yes, you have," reiterated Mr. Bergh. "You can tell us where the lady is from whom you took these diamonds?" Hammond quickly nodded affirmatively to this remark.

"No, I can't," her ladyship spoke with the gravity of perfect veracity and she looked into her interrogator's eyes as she said it.

"Well, more exactly," Hammond amended, "where was she when you took them?" Bandy in his element, reseized the interrogation point and put in,

"Yes, Birdsong, that's it. Where was the lady when you took these baubles from her?"

"I couldn't say." Peg's voice was undaunted and almost convincing.

"Birdsong, don't force us to remind you that the governments of two republics have put a fixed price upon your head. You can say, and you must." Hammond was a man of considerable determination of character and he uttered this sentence after quite a minute's deliberation.

"Can't and won't," was Peggy's unmoved response.

"Do you know the lady's name?" Sterling asked, starting a new point in all their minds.

Lady Peggy nodded as she answered, "Yes, sir, I do."

"Did you take them from her in New York?" Sterling pursued.

"No, I didn't," she said it with a certain bravado, and quite as if she would not be apt to tolerate much more of a catechism.

"Allow me," Bandy now waved an imperative hand at his companions. "Now, Mr. Birdsong,

it's this way; you have probably, a good-looking chap like you, had your preferences among the ladies, eh?"

"I have," was the immediate response.

"Well, then, we three have ours. A unanimous preference for the owner of these baubles. She left town without a sign, a word; we three banded together and set out to find her; no matter how long it takes, or what it costs, we intend to do what we set out to, see?"

"Did you?" she exclaimed a bit unguardedly. Her ladyship was highly entertained. "I see," she added obligingly.

"We did. And our first atom of a clue is realized in bagging you, Birdsong, with the lady's jewels upon you. Now, we feel sure that you will just tell us, where Lady Peggy de Bohun was when you took possession of these trifles; where did you see her last?"

"I never saw her in my life," asserted her ladyship with the ardor born of perfect truthfulness.

"You took them from her room when she was absent, then? Now in what hotel, house, sleeping-car, boat, machine; eh, Birdsong? In what State, town or territory? or on what lake, river or sea?" Hammond's hand left the discussion of cold chicken in favor of his pistol, by way of pointing a pleasing moral to his catalogue of queries. It was a leisurely list; these three men were en-

joying their new experience, and besides they had at last got word of Peggy!

"Look here, you fellers; you got the upper hand. I ain't nowheres in this game. I ain't going to answer no questions about no ladies: they ain't in my line. I never took much stock in 'em nohow. Goin' to let me go, ain't you?" The supposed horse-stealer's tone was impatient and wrathy.

"Not until you tell us where the lady was?" Sterling's intonation was obdurately calm and one might say ominously continuous in its inflection.

Her ladyship, between serving herself to tongue sandwiches, cold coffee and ice cakes, replied tartly, "That I ain't a-going to do."

"Why not?" Bandy put the query in large-eyed curiosity and bluntness.

"Because I don't damned choose." Lady Peg swallowed her coffee with evident relish, and in great amazement at her own flow of most reproachable language.

"Then," concluded Hammond, "Birdsong, you're in for a prolonged tour with us." His manner was that of one dismissing the present hour, and about to reckon only with the limitless future.

"We've got a key to the lady we're looking for, and, by Jove! we're not letting go of it, until we know all you know," supplemented Sterling while Bergh nodded his entire endorsement.

It would be amusing to hold on to the Tucson Terror. Almost as amusing as London to Madrid in the air, or two years seeking the Pole.

"Ain't you?" the Terror inquired in a meaningful way.

"Birdsong," Sterling then fixed his eyes upon her ladyship's face. "Where is Lady Peggy de Bohun now?" It seemed to her ladyship that the thin disguises of stain, dust, mud, dishevelment, shorn locks and man's clothing were all slipping from her side: she hesitated before answering; she tried to look unconcerned and as a desperado should look. She tried not to fancy that Sterling had recognized her.

"Do you know?" Mr. Sterling's postscript to his question aroused her. Pshaw! he had not seen through: he did not know her.

"Yes, I do," in desperation was it spoken, and spoken clearly and without any waiting at all.

"Where?" The trio voiced it to a man, while even Tippet held his breath as they waited for the thief's answer.

"I say! mightn't she be murdered?" Her ladyship put the query bluntly, so bluntly that they all were struck dumb.

They dropped drum-sticks, forks, knives; while Tippet sought a very brisk retreat behind the machine.

Mr. Hammond jumped up, and springing to

her, grasped Lady Peg's shoulder. "Is she dead?" He shook her well as he asked.

"Not as I knows of."

"Could she have been killed?" He gave her ladyship another shake.

"If she had been, I'd know it," was the quiet response. They all regarded the supposititious villain with marked and disquieted noncomprehension. They couldn't seem to make Birdsong talk.

Birdsong didn't seem to mind being in their clutches enough, to buy his freedom by revealing the whereabouts of Lady Peggy de Bohun. There seemed to be a mystery in the rascal's non-communicativeness.

"Birdsong, what interest has this lady for you other than as to her jewels?" asked Hammond finally.

"None. That's up to you."

Then Mr. Hammond again shook her ladyship vigorously in most righteous and yet most impotent wrath. "You're trying to gain time, Birdsong; that's what you're after; but take care you don't end with a halter."

"No, sir, I don't want no time: it's all to the lady with you: not to me. I ain't no lady's man. I don't know nothin' more about her, and I'm going." She made to fulfill her word.

"No, sir: no 'go' about it." Sterling grasped her by both arms and then covered her

with his gun once more as he let go and backed away.

They all had their irons up, as keeping their faces toward her ladyship, they went far enough from the festal board to speak together unheard. Their air when they returned was unanimously solemn and unanimously fixed.

"No more talking, *Birdsong*," was Hammond's remark.

"Goin' to give me up to the government, are you?" she asked.

"Not much!" Sterling exclaimed. "Oh, no!"

The trio wore an air of genial jollity that was far from reassuring to her ladyship.

"Fond of flying, *Birdsong*? Ever been up in the air?" Bandy inquired pleasantly.

"Once." Lady Peggy recalled Rouen just then most vividly.

"Want to try it again?" queried Mr. Bergh.

"No," she said emphatically, "I don't!"

"Glad to hear it. Because that's just what we're going to do with you. Take you up in my biplane; it's a dandy; and we're going to keep you in the air, until you tell us what we want to know. Tippet, gather up your traps." Mr. Bandeleur Bergh's mandate was obeyed with alacrity.

A quarter of an hour later her ladyship found herself seated in the middle chair in the auto car

under cover of the trio, whose guns were quite visible, while the uncomfortable chauffeur drove away south.

'Our bird, Mr. Birdsong, is waiting for us on a very pretty little plain, a mile or so out of Cats-paw. We'll make the ascent from there quietly; and it's entirely up to you how long we remain above ground."

After Hammond had said this both he and the others relapsed into cigars and silence. They offered Lady Peggy tobacco, of course. She took a cigarette and smoked it nobly; pondering meantime as to what she could do, and what was likely to be the outcome.

Maybe there would arrive an accident worse than the time at Rouen, when Bandy's machine had turtled in the air and shocked her so that she had vowed never to rise over the earth again.

Death itself might be in the 'plane's track this voyage. Well, what did it matter? Since Jack Churchill believed her to be a wicked girl.

Did he believe that?

He couldn't!

He didn't!

He was looking for her now, she was sure of it.

Had he not come back to Walsh's seeking her? Had she not saved him from Birdsong's gang? Was not that his own pistol which Tippet had taken from her, and had now beside him on the front seat?

Peg had mad thoughts again of confession, full confession; of course these crossed her brain: but close at their heels came her ladyship's own wonted pluck.

She give in?

Never!

They might fetch her up to the clouds, as far as where the Great Reaper lived, she would not give in.

She was not the descendant of the first Lady Peggy for nothing. By no manner of means.

In the silence of the run to the plain near Cats-paw, these and a thousand minor and other thoughts came to her.

She assuredly speculated upon the unique expedition of the three men in whose custody she was. They had, it seemed, left town in a Quixotic search for her: she had not credited them with so much originality; she had never realized that they really cared.

What matter if they did!

She knew them for three of the bravest voyagers the new century had shown, she knew that under their lazy veneer they were three men of iron, but what mattered it all?

Nothing mattered, but that she might return to her woman's estate without betraying herself; and send for the soldier-man; and, on her knees, well then, sitting straight and proud, but very likely, tearful, tell him all.

"Here we are!" Mr. Hammond now spoke blithely, breaking in upon her ladyship's perturbed reveries.

"Nice bit of ground to rise from, and not much danger in it." Sterling's accent on the "much" betrayed a seemingly careless though artful purpose.

"She's a fine craft, *Birdsong*," Bandy enthused over his machine as he jumped out of the car. "She does rock a good deal but"—her ladyship knew how much she rocked from her Rouen experience—"but," Bandy continued, "she's as safe as any of them. It's a devil of a chance, anyway," he added musingly as she surveyed the skies above them.

Her heart did sink; there is no use to deny it; and again one brief flash of surrender darted across her vision as she vividly recalled the sickening thud of the wheel, the awful swerve of an aëroplane when it's one thousand feet up in the air, and feels disinclined to do as it's wanted to.

Did she then after all throw up her hands?
She?

CHAPTER XXIII

In which the guardsmen take her ladyship a voyage in the air; during which she first learns of the Captain's letter to the Colonel: during which she strikes one flag and is landed in the Fort

No, she didn't.

There were but few people on the grounds. Any news of the machine's being there had not reached Catspaw. Bandy's crew had only swooped down an hour or so before their master got to the starting post.

Everything was in excellently good shape; upon careful examination he found that his planes were sweet and true and ready. So far as anyone could tell, the bird was in condition. Bandy used no football cap or paddings; he just climbed quietly up, got into the saddle, passed the strap across, and buckled it. Then he began tuning up.

Hammond first climbed in, her ladyship was directed to climb in next; Sterling after her: they were excessively particular, she did not fail to note, to keep her always between two of them.

Bandy nodded silently to one of his men, who, somewhat mystified and uneasy still obeyed the master's signal, started the big propeller twist-

ing; the engine responded beautifully; the 'plane skimmed along the ground for perhaps fifty feet, then she rose into the air with a gentle sweep up, up, up one thousand feet; the rhythmic throb of the engine, seeming to pulsate with the currents that it encountered, seeming to her ladyship to be beating remorselessly, relentlessly at her heart.

For the first half hour or so they moved as stably as a rock, maintaining the altitude with perfect steadiness. Then suddenly Mr. Bergh began cutting a few of those fancy figures in the atmosphere for which his name had even then become famous.

He dipped her, rolled her, circled her, swinging along at the rate of surely fifty miles an hour. Then he indulged in some pretty wide sweeps, some dips as pointed as a pen; then softly like a gigantic feather; again sharply, as if cutting the clouds in pieces. Mr. Bergh, not to be even convicted of the least poetic license, made a very near show at carving the oxygen.

"How does it go, *Birdsong?*" he sang out presently.

"Seems to go on," was the laconic reply.

"Feel as if you'd tell us now where Lady Peggy is?" Bandy inquired between the gasps he had to fetch for his own breath.

Her ladyship made the only reply she could,

for talking was impossible. She shook her head fiercely.

Then Mr. Bergh tried ripping up the atmosphere as if it were a bit of cloth, and his bird a rushing mastodon knife. In this gambol he encountered a swirl or two, tumbling up from the cañons below; for they had flown south and were hovering over the big twin chasms, Tia Juana and Tio Juan: and no sooner was the machine caught in the embrace, than with his own and the others' nerves thrilling to top notch, Bandy put it all on, and they rose with the preparatory sickening dip, five hundred feet higher yet!

Her ladyship at this point could scarcely keep up her courage. She almost nodded her head in her despair.

Just a little way yonder on it was as peaceful as a morning in May: Bergh mercifully gave his canvas helm a shift, slackened his speed, and it felt to them all as if the great bird stood still in the vault; the fact was, she floated slowly and waveringly down to the earth and her engines were silent.

At this crisis Sterling looked at the supposititious Tucson Terror. Peggy was, even through veils of coffee stain and much accumulated mud, the penetrating hue of chalk; her lips were blue, her teeth chattering, her eyes glazing. Birdsong looked to Mr. Sterling as like Death as any man he'd seen freeze out of life down at the Pole.

He raised his arm impatiently to Bandy to lower, jerking his head too at her ladyship as he warned the master aéronaut.

Bandy understood. The swerve had been deadly almost, to him too. In a very few minutes, the man at the helm had his air-craft swooping cautiously earthward and presently landed her in the middle of an alfalfa meadow.

Peg had gotten back both her nerve and her breath as they lowered; she could even lift her head and her lids.

She found the eyes of all three men fixed upon her intently and awestruck in a sense. Hammond held a flask to her lips. She touched it merely.

"I ain't no good at the bird business. Say, let me get away?" She tried to stand up, but couldn't yet.

"Birdsong," Bandy replied, "you're with us for keeps until you tell us all we want to know."

"Birdsong, where is Lady Peggy?" Sterling asked. "You know you don't want to stop with us here forever? It did not agree with you, flying didn't, Birdsong. You're the color of chalk. Come now, tell us or up you go again, alone with Mr. Bergh next time and he can stop up all night."

Her ladyship shook her head. It was physically impossible at the moment for her to do anything else.

Presently, she did contrive to say: "It ain't no business of mine to be telling nothing about

anyone. You've got her things, that's all there is to it. You can keep me here until we all wither. I won't tell what I can't." The Terror's tone, notwithstanding the pallor of the Terror's countenance, argued no early capitulation notwithstanding the thrilling grilling of the air that had already been his (or her) portion.

Where they now sat it was balmy; it was beautiful, swathed in the long luscious grass, bathed in evanescent fragrance, lulled by the mere bald fact of stand-still after the mad aerial plunging Bandy had treated them to.

Her ladyship's lungs began to work normally again: her ladyship's brain also resumed the level. She saw Bandy sitting on the saddle calmly smoking: between her half-closed lids she observed the glances exchanged between the saddle-man and his two comrades, their pantomime insured a second tour of the clouds should their captive hold out in not revealing the whereabouts of Peggy! It also revealed infinite time, patience, and persistence on their part.

Peg, as she got better and better hold of herself from the effects of her flight, was once more assailed by the temptation to tell all.

They were fine and loyal and true men to the core of their three hearts: they would never betray her to anyone living. If she told them the truth she would get to Punty's — well, to Jack then, in two hours' time.

Should she at last confess? As her ladyship thus brought herself to bay, Mr. Sterling, who was watching the color return to her face, said idly to the others: "I wonder, by the way, if they've run down that spy we heard of yesterday, yet?"

"Oh, likely," was Hammond's rejoinder.

Her ladyship, notwithstanding the deadly sensations still at work at her head and heart, was all ears now, although her lids fell once more.

"They're sure to have gotten him by this, with an officer and ten men out scouring. By the way, that young Lieutenant said the spy was in love with a Mr. Gratiot's wife, didn't he? Quite a romance, wasn't it?" Mr. Bergh exclaimed. Lady Peggy's lips quivered: there were almost tears in her eyes, not quite.

"Yes," returned Sterling, "she was the wife of a man who turned up suddenly after she thought him dead; wasn't that the size of it? The Gratiot man was the husband, and the spy was the lover." They all laughed.

"Usual thing," Bandy nodded. "Poor luck!"

"Good luck," contradicted Hammond; "if Captain Churchill could be such an infernal scamp as to be selling out our fortification plans to the Japs, no girl ought to love him; he deserves to lose her."

Lady Peggy's wrath came in throbs of amazement.

"He'll lose more than the woman! He'll lose his life," remarked Mr. Sterling carelessly.

"Sure. Odd he confessed, wasn't it?" Bergh spoke.

"But did he?" asked Hammond.

"Certainly he did. Didn't you hear that? Where were your ears? Thorsby told us. The last thing he said there in Punty's yard was that the Colonel had just got a letter from Churchill himself, confessing that he was the traitor. All along, it seems, they'd been fastening it on some other chap, while Churchill had been the very man who was running the other man to earth."

There was a pause; then, someone spoke, and the sound of the voice they heard made them all start.

"Who was the other man?" It was her ladyship's own voice, but it seemed even to her, to come echoing back from a grave in which she might have lain for years, so hollow, so appalling, was its sound as it uttered these words.

Hammond, with one eye upon the billowy cloud-sea in which they had been lately lazily, turned the other quickly upon her ladyship and said, "We didn't hear. Why?"

"Them kind of fellers is all in my line, you see," was her ladyship's rejoinder.

"Oh, to be sure, you do wear a uniform, don't you, Birdsong?" Sterling and Hammond both laughed. "Where did you get it?"

"Walsh's." How pleased Peg was to get hold of veracity of the meagrest sort even.

"By Jupiter!" Espying a jagged cut and a bit of cloth gone from her left sleeve, and whipping a scrap of corresponding woolen from his own pocket, Mr. Hammond matched the color and quality, if not the exact shape as he made his exclamation.

Peggy's only outer shell of thought that minute was of her tresses; but deep in her soul she was plumbing depths that seemed to be bottomless.

"We found this sticking on a post, in the yard not a mile from where you took Star Black from us," said Sterling.

"Did you?" said her ladyship. "I ain't no partic'lar recollection of leavin' it there."

Then all their eyes by some occult beckoning turned to the man in the saddle. Bandy's gaze was fixed, staring, unflinching. He started her up with only himself and Peggy for cargo, for the other two men were loitering in the meadow. The propellers were whirling, but the bird, as soon as she'd risen 500 feet, seemed stuck as immovably as if bedded in mud, instead of ether. They poised this way for many seconds, and a second can sometimes seem a good while.

Her ladyship was the one to break the strain.

Her voice, still sounding to her like the voice of the dead, exclaimed, "You there, feller at the helm, I'll tell you where the lady is."

It was a tense instant: Bandy held his breath: he was, strangely enough, remembering that morning at Rouen with Peggy in the car.

"Where is she?" he gasped.

"It's got to be a bargain," Lady Peggy whispered chokingly.

Bandy's bird was now getting away from whatever answers to a quicksand in the upper regions; the machine was presently bucking for all it was worth, against a bunch of those currents which are as hard to tackle as earthly stone walls; but Mr. Bergh had as much grit under his pseudonym as if he didn't always look as if he'd just stepped out of that old traditional bandbox. He kept hold of his bird and his nerves, and his aim; and of his purpose to win out from this caged cutthroat they supposed they had, the whereabouts of Peggy.

"Out with it," he shouted back of him, because now he was lowering his 'plane steeply to get away from the unnavigable circuit; he was rushing her with the up-wind from the big river below, at sixty miles the hour. With a plunge, and a swirl so low over a cataract, that they both caught some of the spume in their faces, they sped for a little; then, pointing his controls upward again, emboldened by the thunderous throbbing of the motor, Bandy raised to the two thousand level as lightly as a plume might wing it; he was gaining a quieter atmosphere before he swerved

her back to the alfalfa meadow which he presently did.

"Put me down at Fort McHenry. Leave me there for fifteen minutes. Watch me when I go in and when I come out. You'll know where the girl is before you quit; if you'll let me off quietly then and there."

"Done," Bandy nodded to the other two. "You see, old man, the upper atmosphere has cleared Mr. Birdsong's vision."

"Done!" echoed Hammond and Sterling as they entered the 'plane.

They were soon over Mexico land; they were beyond the firing line too; for, even as Bandy reversed for the north, they heard the detonations, they saw volleys of smoke beneath them. Days afterward they all knew that they had sailed above the bloody battle of Monte Oaxcita.

Bandy, once up again however, held his altitude, and such was the area of peace that it was just one long glide, smooth as a dancing floor, waveless as parlor skating, until they struck the cliffs and cañons where the cave lay hidden, to which her ladyship had wanted to guide Kent Gratiot.

Here the airman made a splendid spiral dip at great speed; then maneuvering at a slighter angle, he rounded the hilltop back of the Fort; soared her up once more, and caught the sunset on the under sides of his planes.

248 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

The voyagers couldn't see it, of course, but the Colonel of the 42nd did: that exquisite pink tinge on the wings of this gigantic butterfly, as it fluttered against the mottled mackerel sky of that afternoon. They were soon well down near *terra firma*. Her ladyship easily beheld the Colonel pacing the stone court-yard.

"That's the man I want to see," she ejaculated, adding, "You can make a first-class landing right on that meadow, mister, where those ponies are."

"You know the lay of the land here, Birdsong, it seems?" inquired Sterling.

No one of the three guardsmen had spoken before, since the compact was made. Sterling was the first.

"Yes, I know it," her ladyship curtly replied.

Bandy then took his bearings, but it was without being able to count on a freak wind which came now churning up, from the river doubtless, as it wound along Death Valley, and it bore on its train a sheet of rain as thick as milk. They were all wet to the skin; the flyers were chilled too, and although Bandy handled it beautifully, the descent was rather perilous; the landing was rough; thrice the 'plane rebounded willfully into the air before coming to rest.

The paddock, a ten-acre meadow, where they alighted, was off the Fort an eighth of a mile.

Once out of the 'plane, upon examination the

trio had to agree that their bird was out of commission for the present, and that all they could do, once Birdsong's information should be in their possession, was to 'phone back to Gathrie from Punty's, down the road a short piece, for the auto to run up and fetch them to wherever Birdsong said her ladyship was.

Her ladyship, sick almost unto death, but as game as if her legs were not shaking under her like aspen twigs, jumped from the 'plane by herself, forgetting for the moment the left sleeve of her jacket, until a stray and infinitesimal curl caught her eye hanging down over her hand: She had time to push it back though, and up, before anyone else saw it.

"Now, Mr. Birdsong," Bandy took his guns from his pockets, "here we are."

"Right here," added Sterling.

"Quite fit, all of us," contributed Mr. Hammond, each handling his Colt conspicuously.

"I thought Mr. Birdsong would take a mental somersault in the second dose of upper air," remarked Bandy. "Now, make for the Fort, and don't forget to come back. You're under fire, Mr. Birdsong, and if we don't know where the lady is before you're fifteen minutes' older, it's lead marbles for yours, and plenty of them."

"So long!" cried Lady Peggy, putting as bravely as her soggy clothes would let her for the man pacing up and down the yard.

The three guardsmen certainly accompanied her to within easy range of their artillery; they saw her attain the solitary figure on the stone plateau, apparently without any difficulty; there seemed to be no sentries about: they saw her salute; they beheld her, after a few seconds, following the commanding officer, for it was he, into the Fort!

"Cheating, by thunder!" cried Mr. Bergh, making a dash for the plateau.

"Hold on, Bandy; don't be a fool!" urged Mr. Hammond.

"It's not likely the commanding officer of Fort McHenry's lending himself to any questionable business."

"I think Birdsong's O.K." Sterling spoke slowly; "so far as information for us is concerned."

"I don't!" exclaimed Mr. Bergh hotly. "I tell you what I think, boys; he's got the Colonel's ear with some sort of yarn about knowing where that spy is putting up; he'll get a mount out of the old chap, and ride off by the back path, leaving us cooling our heels here, like a three of fools, and no more finding out where Lady Peggy is than ever!"

Sterling and Hammond exchanged a look which certainly admitted the possibilities of Bandy's theory.

"Pshaw! no! though," Hammond finally cried

after a reconnoitre. "Look here, there is no back path or any such nonsense. Hark, the 'phone bell's ringing, I hear it; over in the stables. There's an orderly — look!"

"Jupiter! what did I tell you?" whispered Bandy excitedly, "the striker's haltering the best horse in that bunch in the paddock, see! Leading him to the yard, and saddling him!"

Hammond and Sterling pooh-poohed, but they watched the man and the beast.

"The Colonel is going out for his afternoon canter," remarked Sterling in a matter-of-course way.

"Five to eleven, boys, you'll see Birdsong on top of that nag, riding out of here quite rapidly, before we're much older." Mr. Bergh threw the bet and put up the paper money like a man.

"Not if I know it!" Sterling now crept closer to the low wall dividing the plateau from the common; Hammond was after him, Bandy came abreast; the three guardsmen, although they didn't realize it, forming thus as suggestive a target for a neat pick-off, as any marksman could desire, provided the marksman were stationed just where, presently, the Colonel and her soggy, grimy, game ladyship were.

There she stood beside the grizzly old commanding officer; both were silent; the orderly, as if by magic was already at the step, with the horse the trio had watched being saddled.

252 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

And her ladyship, without more ado, was up
with a spring, and astride.

Then Bandy Bergh broke loose.

"I say!" he yelled with a Colt in either fist.

And over the wall there pointed the ammu-ni-tion of the trio, straight at my Lady Peggy's heart.

CHAPTER XXIV.

In which Bandy remarks that he has won his bet: and her ladyship quits the Fort on the Colonel's own mount; and the guardsmen leave for the place where Lady Peggy is said to be

SHE nodded and spoke: "I ain't gone yet."

"If you stir, Fort or no Fort, Colonel or no Colonel"—for the commanding officer had put up his hand warningly—"you're a dead man," Hammond cried out lustily.

"That I swear I'll never be!" Lady Peggy sang back almost with a smile.

"Keep your word then. We mean business." Sterling didn't relax a muscle as he made his response.

"I ain't going to break my word. Here," she took from her pocket a folded scrap of paper, and tossed it in the direction of the three heads over the wall.

Bandy made a handspring and reached it first.

"That's the lady's present address," her ladyship said.

"Wait," came from the other two, who almost in suspended animation gasped for Mr. Bergh's revelation. Bandy was unfolding the paper.

Her ladyship waited with her hand on the bridle, her eyes on the three men who were here to her account, and with the Colonel's gaze on her face. She only waited a few seconds however.

Bandy nodded slowly; he took off his hat; the other guardsmen followed suit; the Colonel acknowledged the salute. Her ladyship, the orderly letting go the mare's mouth, rode out of the yard of Fort McHenry at a lope, presently a gallop, shortly a run and out of their range of vision.

They crowded together close in the meadow, under the wall, while Bandy spread the paper out on top of the smoothest stone. They read: "Will be Hotel Xochitl, San Zucato, Mexico, May the 10th, Lady Peggy de Bohun."

It was the even date. This was May the 10th.

It was in her ladyship's well-known big handwriting; it was on fine paper: it even bore a faint perfume, the one, in their fond fancies, that her ladyship was wont to use; in reality, it was quite a different fragrance, and emanated from the Colonel's own kit.

To Punty's a-foot they went, and as fast as human foot could make it to the 'phone and rang up Gathrie: "Tippet? The machine; and send a crew for the 'plane; yes, here at Fort McHenry top speed; we must make San Zucato to-night. No, Tippet, Mr. Birdsong does not travel with us any longer. What's that? You couldn't if he did? Well, he does not. And you lose your

MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN 255

place if we don't reach the Border town before ten this evening. Good-by."

Bandy won his bet as he reminded his comrades on the road to Mexico about three hours later. Tippet had reached them with the car and he was driving.

CHAPTER XXV

In which the three guardsmen entertain the spy; show him Peggy's jewels; and only learn the name of their guest as he speeds away from them

WHEN Captain Churchill had loped away from the three guardsmen early that day, he was sure bound for Catspaw, which is as everyone who has traveled that way knows, no distance at all from Eagle-Pass gateway; and Catspaw he soon reached. Once there all the information he gained was that no trains whatever were outgoing or incoming; firing was brisk near by.

Yes, one lady had arrived; and she had left; yes, she had any amount of luggage; no, not a young lady, oh, no! Very settled indeed, and very sorrowful; probably a mother mourning a son shot in the battles.

Any slim young men? No. All of those were fighting, either in the armies of Mexico or in the Border warfare, or with, perhaps, desperadoes, looters, murderers, who could say! They were in plenty up and down, hiding, anywhere, everywhere.

The Captain therefore decided, after getting a

bite, that the Barkeep, upon whom he had been pinning his last hope, had doubtless crossed the line and cast in with either one or other of the two parties, if indeed his youthful spirits had not tempted him along the enticing paths of free lancing.

But Peggy? He saw Peggy lying in a pool of her own bright blood in some thicket, or cave, or where might it not be! And it is not to be denied that Churchill could not be accused of over-imagination as he surveyed the packet of her ladyship's well-known garments strapped beneath his saddle at that very moment.

She must be, dead or alive, within the five-mile radius, he felt sure, of Walsh's, where he had found her clothes in the ice-box. He would scour the cactus afoot; he would not leave an inch of ground unsearched, if it took him days to do it; he could only die once; and a matter of hours was nothing; they'd find that he'd turn up at the Fort sooner or later.

If Thorsby and his men caught him? Well, Thorsby was not a bad sort; he'd give him grace to find his lady's dead body.

So back the Captain started for the region of Walsh's shack, reaching there about toward twilight, with a moon a finger wide riding high in the blue. He presently dismounted, tied his nag to a tree and struck into the thicket afoot; his sole inspiration being a half-beaten-in boot-track,

258 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

man's size, and the hoof-prints of two ponies which he despaired as he was riding slowly by.

He remembered suddenly then that Gratiot had gone away with both her ladyship's animals!

Then Gratiot, the picture rose easily to his distracted and overwrought mind, having killed Peggy, had laid her on the ponies, and, in the absence of any living soul to hinder, had guided them into the jungle, deposited Peggy's corpse, and made off by some opposite trail, known only perhaps to the spy himself.

For the Captain could discover no return prints of either man or beasts.

For an hour and more he beat all about, in the slow coming-on twilight; without compass, key or hint; the track, he at last found, stopped short on the edge of a woodland pool, and there was not a trace of its resumption anywhere. Churchill then struck it back for the road, intending to gallop to the next opening he might find in the giant thickets.

When he got to his horse, however, he beheld the same motor-car that he had encountered before and the same men; they were halted and an *al-fresco* meal was spread upon the cushions of the two middle seats.

Stop a minute.

The food was upon one seat only.

On the other lay an array of jewels that caught the young moonlight prisoner, and the flash and

sparkle of them was glorious in his eyes. He rather wondered if the travelers were thieves, but his brain was too much on Peggy to know, or care to know, aught else.

"Hello, gentlemen, once again!" Churchill took off his cap. And as he instinctively gave the courtesy, it flashed upon him that these men might have seen the Barkeep or even Lady Peggy herself.

"Hello, sir! Glad to meet you," Hammond cried out cheerily.

"Howdy!" Bandy said hospitably as he carved a fowl.

"This is fine!" Sterling tagged on heartily. "Step right up and join us, sir. Nothing to boast of, but not too bad. Tippet, another plate, please."

Tippet's disapproval was certainly minus words, but none the less obvious; Tippet was inoculated, so to speak, with Birdsongism, and beheld in every chance man he met a most probable cutthroat.

"Thank you. I will accept." Jack's eyes, as he drew near, as they made room for him in the machine, unlocking a front chair and whirling it around, were fastened upon those jewels, that miniature, those rings.

Peggy's possessions; he had recognized them as soon as he had gotten a bit closer than that first glance.

Who and what were these men? Again he asked himself and this time with a vastly accelerated interest.

Had he done Gratiot an injustice, and were these three jolly fellows, desperadoes of the gentlemanly, drawing-room type, so dear to the fictionists of the day?

His lips parted to exclaim, to question, demand, when his sound sense got the upper hand and he recalled that he was entirely unarmed; one to four, and the one fairly exhausted after the strain of the last forty-eight hours or so.

Accepting a beef sandwich and a glass of ale, the Captain presently asked, in as jovial a tone as he could, "Have you been stopping around here long, may I inquire?"

"Not been stopping anywhere." Sterling was disposed to be noncommittal always at first, but under the benign influence of food and drink, however, he could be relied upon to tell almost all he ever had known to any genial and well-appearing interlocutor.

"Have you found that slim lad you were after, sir?" asked Bandy, who was simply aching to unburden his own soul.

Churchill shook his head. "I am still searching for him. Just came out of the cactus now looking for a trail."

"We were more fortunate than you, sir," said Hammond.

"Did you run across such a lad?" Churchill asked eagerly; "a young chap in a ragged uniform, a curly-haired, dirty chap, but game, very slightly built, dark, almost swarthy?"

"He was just such an individual, sir; your description fits him to a T!" was Hammond's response.

"Where did you see him, may I ask?" Jack's query came through shut lips and yet impatiently.

"Well, sir, we rounded Birdsong as neatly as a pin in a row, not very far from here, sir!" Mr. Sterling, balancing his fork on a cup rim, spoke as if weighing the catch in his mental balance.

"Birdsong!" repeated Churchill, naturally not finding the description given, a tally at all.

"Yes, sir! Billy Birdsong the Tucson Terror, upon whose precious head both U. S. A. and Mexico have set a fairly large price." Bandy thus assumed the thread of narrative. "We nabbed him on the very horse he'd stolen under our eyes; Star Black, a beast that has won more blue ribbons than—"

"There, there, Bandy," put in Hammond with becoming modesty, "our guest is not interested in Star Black's achievements. What he's glad to hear, no doubt, is that Birdsong has been come up with!"

"He certainly is with us on that," remarked Sterling.

"I am most undoubtedly." The guest's eyes were riveted on Peggy's rings.

"Of course it was Birdsong, you were looking for too, sir?" Bandy liked his facts clean-cut, and without any fringing doubts, and usually put his questions most directly.

The Captain hesitated just a second. "I am not sure, sir; the description, you say, tallies excellently, but I know of the party I'm after, under another name." As he spoke he was staring at the glittering array spread out across the car. Yes, that was her ancestress's miniature.

"Oh! Well, Birdsong very likely has a long string of aliases," Sterling laughed.

"I presume he has," the Captain rejoined. "So long as you've landed the fish it's all to the good. Where have you got him locked up, may I venture to inquire?"

It was a relevant and pertinent question, but it entailed a mental balk for the three guardsmen, which each one had to square for himself, since a consultation was just then out of the question.

So there was a very perceptible pause.

They all three had forgotten that this man here with them breaking bread was an unknown quantity to them: his very name and estate, save for the half-way uniform he wore, were a sealed letter; but, such is the power of personality, coupled with almost every man's inexplicable hunger to expound his own affairs, that, as by common con-

sent, each of Peggy's three adorers started to speak at once, and each was going to say about the same thing.

Only Bandy got out the first word, and by assent of the eyes of his comrades, on he went.

"We didn't get him locked up," he exclaimed, cutting a sandwich in two.

"He escaped you after all, then?" Churchill's intonation was rather bored and his rapid-fire conclusion was that these three individuals with whom he was lunching were thieves and murderers, trying to put off their own deeds upon the shoulders of the luckless young Barkeep whom they had probably met, bagged, and lost; upon whom, too, they were now fastening the onus of being a Birdsong; and, by implication, in view of possible future apprehension, the murderer of Lady Peggy.

But there was nothing for him to do but keep cool, and listen; which, if a man can do, especially the listening part of the game, he will learn more than books can ever teach him.

"No," Bandy hesitated, seeking endorsement from his comrades by way of the eye. "We let him off." The manner was wisely enough somewhat dubious.

"Whereabouts did you put him loose again?" Churchill smiled pleasantly as he put the question.

"At," after an infinitesimal silence, "Fort McHenry." Sterling furnished the information.

264 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"Oh, they'll catch him there; that's a sure thing."

But all three of the guardsmen then shook their heads solemnly.

"No," Mr. Sterling picked up the thread, "they won't. We made a bargain with Birdsong." It was said with a crutch, of course; they were all three tacitly rather nonplussed at their own methods seen in the retrospect.

Churchill instinctively felt that the clue was getting uncovered, or nearly so; therefore he sat perfectly still, his gaze fastened upon the pretty rings he had so often seen glittering on her ladyship's pretty hands.

"You see, sir." There was a considerable pause. Then, "there's a girl at the bottom of our well." Hammond said this and his speech appeared to relieve the strain upon his comrades; each took breath more easily, for none of them had cared to pose as a coward or as one giving a Birdsong his freedom.

The Captain made a comprehending inclination of the head, accompanied by the smile that the mention of girl is more apt than not to arouse.

Were they about to rehearse to him the murder of the owner of those jewels? Men had been known to do such things more than once, when they felt they had met a suitable receiver.

"She left town," Bandy caught the line and spoke quickly, "without a word of warning, sir,

leaving us all in the lurch; the greatest belle and beauty New York ever saw. We, that is I mean, the three of us here, couldn't stand it. We got together and laid plans, ferreted out a sort of key to the mystery. We discovered that she'd come out here somewhere."

"We all three, sir, felt about the same way, you understand; not that we were the only ones," Hammond interpolated sadly.

"Dozens of us," ejaculated Sterling morosely.

"But we three," Bandy continued, "seemed to feel a bit differently. We rather knew there wasn't any solid hope to speak of, for anyone of us; but we couldn't go on you know, eating and drinking, dancing and fooling, when we hadn't an idea where she was, or why the deuce she'd skipped away."

"I see. A very remarkable three of hearts!" Churchill actually laughed, even while his gaze wandered from Peggy's jewels over to Peggy's clothes, strapped on his horse's back.

Were they three New York burglars? The Raffles sort of a lot; and did they mistake him for a man of their own questionable quality? Would he ever get at the bottom of things? Why was he fooling away time with them, anyway?

"Yes, that's just it: we are remarkable, I think, but you see, Lady Peggy de Bohun is the most remarkable girl that ever lived. It is she who makes us remarkable; left to ourselves we're an

266 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

ordinary lot, very." Bandy's tone was conclusive.

"Lady Peggy de Bohun," the soldier-man repeated the name interestedly enough.

The Captain had heard of her: he noted too that her name was "Peggy," but his mind was in no ways distracted from its bent of robbery and assassination, in connection with his amiable and talkative hosts.

"Those jewels, sir," Churchill could scarcely forbear an added interest in his demeanor, as Mr. Bergh went on, "to make a long story short, belong to Lady Peggy de Bohun. And we found them in Birdsong's pockets." Bandy finished his speech with neatness of emphasis and with seeming satisfaction at having made a clean breast of the most of the matter.

Jack Churchill strained every drop of blood in his body to keep quiet: he even glanced up only half-interestedly at Bandy, as if he merely now awaited the further particulars in a story that he heard, as a man hears many things, with mere courtesy.

"And Birdsong, as the price of being let off, and only after we'd nearly killed him in my air-car, told us where the lady was, from whom he had stolen those things; the rings, the diamonds, and the miniature of her ancestress, the first Lady Peggy!" Bandy held the portrait up for Captain Churchill to examine.

"Beautiful!" he exclaimed with warmth; had they but known it, it was the warmth of one who scents villainy and intrigue, longs to punish them, and dares not even attempt the same.

"Not half as lovely as our Lady Peggy!" Hammond touched the miniature as he said this.

The guest's breath came quickly, his arteries were throbbing, as he said, "Then you have ended your quest and found the lady?"

"Oh, not yet. We end it to-night," Sterling answered.

"Birdsong told us she was at San Zucato, Mexican side," Hammond went on, "and we reckon to reach there before ten this evening easily. Don't you think so? You are doubtless familiar with the route?"

"I think you'll make it easily," was Jack's answer. "You believe Birdsong, then?" the soldier-man added, trying to lean back unconcernedly.

"Why, yes, we do?" Bandy replied, "because, you see, he gave us pretty good proof."

"Yes, indisputable proof," added Sterling conclusively, taking a slip of paper from his pocket and spreading it out before their assembled eyes.

"In her own handwriting, sir, which we all know pretty well," Hammond spoke with reminiscent feeling. He had been in the habit of offering himself to her ladyship usually once a week by post, and he had religiously kept all her "no's."

268 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

Churchill read that slip. It was Mrs. Gratiot's writing, he too knew it extremely well.

Then, unknown to these friends of hers, or indeed to any friends at all, she must have left town to marry Gratiot; but they said she had been married to Gratiot years before.

No. She hadn't. He knew that much from her own lips. Knew she had never been married at all to Gratiot, though perhaps she had been married to someone named "Payne." He remembered that name too.

And the surge of it all nearly blinded him.

It could not be she. There was some strange mixing up and misinterpretation.

But her rings?

Yes, but also her garments hidden in the ice-box.

It could not be his Peggy.

No, impossible; even in the teeth of the whole disclosure he could not credit that.

He'd make one more throw and then he'd quit.

"Did the lady leave town alone?" he asked jocularly regarding his hosts.

"Oh, no. Her aunt and chaperone, Miss Burgoyne, went too," Bandy answered.

The soldier-man then felt as if his brain were whirling somewhere beyond his control.

Then Peggy, his Peggy, was known under still another name. This made three: Payne, Gratiot and De Bohun.

"Quite a romantic little episode," he however contrived to rejoin.

Then it must be his Peggy, and how many other people's Peggy too!

Was she safe?

To be sure that slip of her penmanship! that slip said where and when.

What it all meant? no matter; that was no concern of his.

His goal now was the Fort, and the bandage, and the line-up for target practice. Since she was safe, and was too it seemed indisputable, three persons instead of one.

What need had she of him! None.

Then he reflected, that through all the mist of it he believed in her wholly.

Evidently, since these men knew that Thorsby was out after him with his men, Peggy knew that too, wherever she was. Peggy understood; she accepted. She must have loved Gratiot, yes, that was the heart of the mystery after all. 'Twas something to die for her sake, in place of the man for whom, he now was sure, she must care, or have cared for, the man whose name she bore at the present time, whatever other names she used elsewhere.

"The man for whom she cared," that sentence kept repeating itself interminably in Jack Churchill's brain. "The man for whom she cared," but whose wife she was not.

The Captain, as he thought these things, shut his lips tight. For a second, murder knocked at his own door, and he opened very wide.

Had Gratiot been near him then, it is safe to say he would have killed him.

As it was, he made his thanks to the three travelers and his adieux as well, in fact he got through all the conventions quite glibly, and was up presently on his saddle, a tip to Tippet, and his cap off to his hosts, when Bandy (of course) asked.

"We'd like to know, sir, whom we've had the pleasure of entertaining? Here are our cards."

He handed out three.

The Captain took them and put them in his pocket; then he rose in his stirrups, and said very quietly, "I am Captain Churchill; if Lieutenant Thorsby passes this way, will you have the goodness to tell him that he will find me at the Fort."

The horseman was gone.

Down the hill, at breakneck speed; no grain of dust; a few splashes from the pools: then but a speck on the far-off plain below them; nothing for their eyes but the empty horizon of the night.

CHAPTER XXVI

*In which Judy asks, "Who is Lady Peggy de Bohun?"
and is not told*

LIEUTENANT THORSBY returned to the Fort that evening early, in fact about only a quarter of an hour after her ladyship had ridden out of the quadrangle, on the Colonel's mount, and he did not happen to have met the three guardsmen either.

After an interview and a report to the commanding officer, Thorsby sent his men to mess; and then, not even waiting to change his jacket, he made off at a rattling pace for the hedge on the other side of the meadow. It was a tall hedge, ten feet high at the least, and Charley felt quite positive that it sheltered someone whom he was very desirous of seeing. It was Judy, of course. She was waiting there with a book upside down, and all smiles and quick joy for him.

"I've been here, off and on, every half hour since you went out, except during the night. I've been hunting for butterflies for my collection," she added severely, as she displayed the net.

"Nice healthy air for you, little girl," Thorsby surveyed her with eager admiration.

"Did you get him?" Judy asked.

"Get whom?" the young officer inquired; by the light of Judy's eyes he had clean forgotten all the spies that ever were born.

"The—spy," she exclaimed reproachfully, but with an acceleration of interest for it struck Florida's little sister that Mr. Thorsby's oblivious attitude argued some news that he would be unwilling to impart; therefore, bad news according to her girlish code.

Thorsby shook his head. "Didn't get a thing except a splendid appetite, for forbidden fruits." He had a clover blossom in his hand; he touched, almost touched, her mouth with it.

"Hush-h. I know you went out with ten men after the spy. I know many things. I am not to be kept in the dark; tell me all about it, please do?" she added plaintively.

"Who is the spy?" asked the young officer matter-of-factly.

"Why, Captain Churchill, of course!" Judy regarded him with reproachful observation.

The Lieutenant looked into her sweet freckled face with the sunset shining on it. "Where's your sister?" he asked with seeming irrelevancy.

"I am not my sister's keeper," she retorted in a vexed fashion.

"Clearly not, since you haven't kept her here," he returned with promptness.

"How do you know that?" she asked in an alarmed way.

"Because: I have been looking for her." He spoke fixedly and earnestly.

"Where?" Judy was staggered, and betrayed her state of mind.

"Everywhere," was the short rejoinder to the point.

"Well?" she exclaimed defiantly, "what if you have! What of it?"

"Did she tell you where she was going?" asked the Lieutenant.

Judy was silent.

"It's a bad business, little sweetheart." He approached her with the clover blossom in his hand.

Judy nodded; her lids were lowered, and the warm red was rushing up over all the golden freckles.

"When a girl has to go kiting after a chap herself, and when he isn't worthy, it's a shame!" Thorsby hurried it out and threw the clover to the ground; she picked up the clover.

"But it's the man she loves," whispered Judy. "Will they get him?" She was shivering now as she stared at the soldier.

"Certainly, if they can." Thorsby was leaning against the stone wall and his face had a moody expression.

"Florida'd die for him," the girl cried out.

"He likely'll call upon her to do that very thing." Thorsby spoke with withering contempt.

"No! He'll get away," Judy answered with solid conviction. "I know Kent Gratiot."

"Maybe you do." Then he took the clover blossom from her and said bluntly enough, "Do you love me, Judy Payne?"

There was a long silence, then the younger Miss Payne replied cautiously, "I may in time, Lieutenant Thorsby."

"What time?" he inquired impatiently.

"We'll see." She had plucked another clover for herself and was stripping off the tiny leaves.

"Make it now," he urged hotly.

"No. There is too much else on my mind." Judy's accent indicated no end of complications of all sorts.

"What, for instance?" Thorsby jerked out yearningly.

"Three adorable men." Judy pointed her remark by pulling off three fat leaves from her clover.

"Three what?" he cried out ironically.

"You heard what I said perfectly well." She was smiling, and her air was brimful of tantalization.

"No man is adorable but me," he laughed and then grew very serious. "Oh, little girl, call it off with all the rest of them, can't you? I say,

there isn't another girl in the world for me. Who are these three? Where did they come from?"

"They came from New York." She uttered the words as those do who have men dear to them in other places than where she stood.

"What did they come for?" he inquired jealously.

"Looking for a girl." Judy laughed outright.

"Looking for you?" he cried out in vexation and chagrin.

"No, I wish they had been!" she responded quickly and provokingly. Thorsby looked at her attentively.

"No you don't," he said conclusively.

Judy laughed but confusedly. "They were looking for a girl named Lady Peggy de Bohun."

"Oh, they were, eh? Then, let me see, they were the Messrs. Bergh, Sterling and Hammond?" consulting cards from his pocketbook. "I introduced them to you, you recall?" with importance.

"Yes, you did but they were back at Punty's to-day; they caught the Tucson Terror! I heard them telling Punty, and one of them has very handsome eyes which he knows how to use."

"By Jove! they have? He has, eh? Where is he?"

"The one with the handsome eyes?" she asked.

Thorsby shook his head. "No, I mean the Tucson Terror." Then he laughed, too.

"Oh, they said they let him go," was Judy's reply.

"If they said that, they never caught him." The young soldier took a few disgusted paces and returned to her side.

"They are most charming men," Judy proceeded reminiscently.

"Are they? Yes, to be sure! I understand that Lady Peggy de Bohun is more than charming too." He took another turn over the grass and only halfway back this time.

"Will they find her, Lady Peggy de Bohun, do you think?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. I hope so. I'd like to find her myself."

"Are you looking for her too?" Judy's tone was amazed and curious both.

"No, not now." The Lieutenant kept pacing up and down.

"Where is Captain Churchill?" The girl's voice took on a supergrave emphasis as she asked this.

"Looking for Mrs. Gratiot, I fancy, or possibly for Lady Peggy de Bohun." Thorsby's eyes were out on the sunset that tipped the hills into glory.

"Does he know Lady Peggy too?" she inquired with astonishment.

"Fancy he does," he said with somewhat ironical emphasis.

"Lieutenant Thorsby, do you know Lady Peggy de Bohun?" The little freckle-faced girl put her query slowly, while she stared hard at her companion.

"I have met her." Thorsby had the provoking air of reserving further information for himself.

"You have!" she cried indignantly. "And never to have told me so before." She flung her clover to the ground.

"I didn't think you'd care to know." As he spoke he stooped and picked up the clover blossom she had thrown away.

"Why not?" she asked quickly.

"Lady Peggy de Bohun is fascinating." He sighed as he pronounced his sentence.

"Indeed, is she?"

"Very," with slow recollective intonation.

"How long have you known her, pray, Lieutenant Thorsby?"

"Some time," he responded carelessly, matching his two clovers.

"Where is she now?" with ill-veiled scorn.

"She is in Mexico." He was consulting his watch. "Yes, along about now, Lady Peggy is in Mexico, sure." Then there came another silence; nothing broke it but a bee who hummed and swam above the Lieutenant's clover.

"Where did you meet her?"

Thorsby's attention was fixed on the bee.

278 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"In a parlor." He now was chasing the bee as he waved his blossoms about and around it.

"Really!" with open scorn now. "How do you come to know at just what precise minute Lady Peggy de Bohun will reach Mexico, may I ask?"

"Because I was told so." There was resignation in his tone also.

"Who told you?" Judy's voice fell as if she were ashamed of her own catechism, yet bound to go on with it.

"Colonel told me, Miss Judy."

"Does the Colonel know Lady Peggy de Bohun too?" she enunciated in consternation.

"Yes, he does." At that crisis the Lieutenant's gaze traveled over to the Fort where the Colonel could be seen at his window, talking at the telephone.

"Does everybody know her?" Judy spoke bitterly.

"Not quite." The young officer was still torturing the bee.

"Does everybody admire her?" Judy spoke with increasing bitterness.

"The men all seem to." There was really a fixed emphasis on this short syllable "all," and Thorsby certainly might have been arrested for cruelty concerning that bee.

"All of them?" she asked as emphatically.

"Why, yes; looks that way." He stood quite

still leaning against the wall; the bee seemed at last to be about to gain the sweets it craved.

"Will you please go back where you came from, Mr. Thorsby?" Judy cried softly as she turned to flee.

"No." The bee got both the clovers straight in the face then.

"Yes, you will," she said with repressed tears as she walked away from him, treading on clovers, bee, and all else.

"Judy!" he exclaimed.

"Never call me that again." The bee had alighted on her instep and certainly, as she feared pain, she had to stop.

"I won't. You prefer sweetheart? so do I." Thorsby chased the bee with his cap, covered it up, and then his arms were nearly about his Judy.

"I don't. Go find Lady Peggy de Bohun, about whom everyone is so wild." The little freckle-faced girl spoke with a decision born mostly of the fact that the bee was whizzing horribly inside of Mr. Thorsby's cap.

"I don't want to go and find Lady Peggy de Bohun," he said quietly.

"Yes, you do!" How nice it was to have the bee in durance vile.

"No, I've found all I want in this world." He spoke now with graveness and he had his arms where he had wanted to have them.

" You haven't," with as much remonstrance as blue cloth permits when made into sleeves.

" I know best about everything," Thorsby remarked seriously.

" Do you? indeed!" Judy's tone was one of surprise, for Thorsby had spoken with lordly joy.

" Certainly I do. Don't I?" He had prisoned the sweet little face between his palms, and was staring down into the gray laughing eyes.

" No! You shan't! I mean you don't! Well, first, tell me who is Lady Peggy de Bohun?"

" She is a girl."

" Whose girl?" Judy introduced a twig to the cap edge and compassionately released the angry bee.

" None of them lassoed her yet, as far as I can make out," was Thorsby's guarded reply. Then he added, " It seems to me you might show more interest in me than in this Lady Peggy de Bohun!"

" But there's some mystery about her?" Judy exclaimed, as if a mystery were only made in order to be solved.

" There certainly is," Thorsby answered with ready celerity. " Now let's let go of her, won't you?"

" You know what the mystery is, don't you?" Judy asked excitedly.

" I do," he replied cheerfully.

"Tell me then?" she said coaxingly, one mite of a hand on his sleeve.

"I can't do that."

"Charley Thorsby, you can." He shook his head gravely. "Why not?" she added attentively.

"Honor, little girl," was the short rejoinder.

"But I'm honor. I'd never tell." The coaxing was evident and it was very charming and beguiling.

"I know you wouldn't; and I have to be just as you would be, if you knew. I can't tell either." Thorsby laughed.

"Good-by." She was fainting off over the grass, the bee and he both after her.

"Judy!" He spoke remonstrantly as he caught up with her.

"You love something else better than me," she remarked reproachfully.

"Sure," he answered quickly; "like the chap in the old song, if I didn't I couldn't love you so much." Mr. Thorsby had quite caught up with the little freckle-faced girl by this time; so had the bee, it was fluttering above her head, with its eye on her mouth; but the bee was bound to be defeated each time that day, for presently Judy's mouth was invisible.

"Lieutenant," she at last managed to murmur, "is Lady Peggy — prettier — than — than — any other girl you ever saw?"

Mr. Thorsby's answer was not verbal; it can't be recorded in satisfactory language; it is merely to say that the bee, quite discouraged, flew away then and there, and was never seen again.

It must have taken some time for Thorsby to make his reply, however, since, when he escorted Judy Payne down back to Punty's, the three guardsmen in their machine, had long ago left the shack.

"They've gone to find Lady Peggy," exclaimed Judy, gazing at the chain tracks in the muddy yard.

"Yes." Then Thorsby turned quickly to the little freckle-faced girl standing beside him and led her into the empty entry of the little hotel.

"Judy, I can't tell you about Lady Peggy. Can you tell me about Florida?" He spoke with deep earnestness now.

"No," she spoke as earnestly.

"Quits?" he asked with an attempt at a smile.

"Even," she responded as lightly as she could.

"Listen"—his arms were again around her—"I can tell you this much. I've been out scouring the country. I've seen Florida"—the little girl started from him—"and Gratiot, deep in the cactus. They got away from me. I'd have shot him dead if she hadn't put herself between us. My men were scattered, none near me." He felt

the young girl's heart throbbing against his own. "Dear, not even for your sister, would I have let up. But she did it for him. He hid behind her and made off on her pony." Thorsby's low whisper was full of contempt.

"Left her?" she cried blankly. "Oh, he didn't leave her!"

"He did leave her, but she followed him. So did I. I lost her in the mists. She knows the country better than I do."

"Of course she does. It's our country: we were born here," the little girl said proudly.

"Dear, your sister is safe," he spoke reassuringly.

"Not unless Kent is; she worships him," was Judy's response and her tone was anxious and half-hearted.

"A wooden idol," the young soldier cried hotly.

"No matter, it's hers," the girl said with sad resignation.

"Judy, will you marry me?" he asked impetuously.

"Some time, maybe I might," was the careful answer.

"Soon?"

"We'll see." Then her mind turned to other matters that puzzled and weighed upon her soul. She repeated,

284 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"We'll see. Is Mrs. Gratiot with her husband?"

Thorsby looked at the little earnest face as earnestly, then he answered, "There isn't any Mrs. Gratiot, dear."

CHAPTER XXVII

In which the Captain and the Colonel meet for five minutes only

CHURCHILL made a terrific run of it for the Fort; when he galloped up the yard he was blood-stained from the digs of his spurs into his animal's sides; he threw the reins to an orderly, and dashed into the Colonel's own private room without warning. There was a salute. It was returned.

"Sit down," came from the Colonel, very curtly spoken too.

"Do it up quickly, sir. I'm ready. Let it be sun-up to-morrow," Jack Churchill exclaimed in a cold voice.

"Sun-up be damned!" cried the superior officer.

"You got my letter, sir?" demanded the Captain.

The older man took the letter from his desk, held it up for Churchill to see, and then he tore it in two, struck a match and burned it up.

"I know, sir," the Colonel said in a voice of low thunder. "I know all."

Churchill sank into the nearest chair for a mo-

286 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

ment, then he was up on his feet. "Colonel, you are mistaken." His voice was as cold and measured as when he had made his first remark.

"The Service never makes mistakes, sir," the commanding officer spoke pompously. "You forget yourself."

Then the commanding officer got to his feet too, and he came over to Jack Churchill and laid his hands on the younger officer's shoulders. "My boy," he said gently; no one had dreamed the Colonel had such tones in his gruff old martinet voice. "You go and tub; and dress; and take one of my horses, do you hear? My Brown Bess, Lantern Laddie's loaned out, and make San Zucato to-night, the Xochitl Hotel, do you remember, to the left of the Plaza Diaz, where we bivouacked when we were sent down there last autumn?"

"But," Churchill was dazed; the long strain, the mental anguish about Lady Peggy; the uncertainty, the ice-box!

"She's there." The Colonel's eyes were looking deep into the Captain's.

Their hands met, closely, comprehendingly with a vast appreciation on both sides.

An hour later, Thorsby was still off duty, and he was smoking in the paddock looking over a lame mount; he saw Churchill come out, get up on Brown Bess and lope off.

Bess's nose was pointing southwards.

Just then Judy came around the hedge.

"Isn't that Captain Churchill now, Charley?" she asked quickly.

"Yes, that's Captain Churchill, little girl; he'll pass us in one second; look over the wall!"

The Lieutenant glanced up as quietly as if it had been any day last month! saluted the Captain; got the return, and added to Judy, as the rider galloped out of sight:

"I reckon he's gone after Lady Peggy de Bon-hun, too." He smiled to himself.

"They all do." Judy pouted, but it was promptly lost in her lover's lips.

CHAPTER XXVIII

In which the guardsmen think they locate Lady Peggy: and also think they see her shadow in the hotel Xochitl. In which they also behold Mr. Birdsong once more

STERLING's machine, Tippet driving, pulled up before the Hotel Xochitl, Señor Domingo Abixtido proprietor, in San Zucato, in very excellent form, about ten P. M. or a trifle after.

Bandy, the preliminaries of alighting, registering, ordering supper, etc., etc., being gotten through with, detained the obsequious Señor Abixtido with an uplifted finger, and began his obvious and tireless trade of interrogation.

" You have a lady stopping here? " he inquired gently.

" Si, Señor." The host advanced a step toward his three new patrons, his voice was lowered, there was a smile upon his supple Latin lips; there was likewise a faint interrogatory in his own tone.

" A lady who arrived yesterday? " pursued Mr. Bergh more gently still.

" The day before, Señor, if it pleases you," corrected the Señor.

"Yes, to be sure, it was the day before," Sterling put in with a recollective air.

"And the lady registered?" Bandy resumed insinuatingly; "of course?"

"Ah, but, no Señor, not so!" It was said with a shrug of his broad shoulders, and an appealing glance for confirmation at the Señora, also the Señoritas (there were five of these), who all stood waiting the pleasure of the newly arrived guests with their husband and father.

All six of these dark-eyed feminines shook their sleek heads violently and cried out together, "But no, no, no; the lady would not do so."

"But the lady's name you know, eh?" Bandy's voice was even more sweetly insinuating now, and quite prophetic too of pence, as he addressed himself to the chorus of the house of Abixtido.

"But no." Oh, Mother of Lies! "they did not remember the lady's name!"

The three guardsmen, en route, had pretty much made up their minds that if her ladyship was indeed at the place indicated by her own chiromancy, a specimen of which had been handed to them by Birdsong, it was most probable that she would be there *incognita*; in fact, these inimitable adorers of her ladyship's, as they neared the frontier, began once more to esteem themselves as fools, for having let Birdsong slip the leash so easily. Perhaps they were.

Of course the rascallion Terror had blinded the Colonel with tales of knowing the spy's whereabouts: and could not they themselves now inform the commanding officer of their own pleasant encounter on the road with the traitor? As to the scrap of paper in Lady Peggy's handwriting, why could they not have realized that Birdsong had, of course, stolen that when he took her ladyship's jewels? It had been lying, doubtless, in one of her boxes; she intending to mail it to some friend. Then if that were the case, she must at least be in Mexico. Perhaps not. Perhaps they had been sold. For her ladyship did nothing quite as often as she changed her mind, yet notwithstanding this, it was Lady Peggy's own hand, of that each was positive and it designated this particular date and place.

She had maybe intended being here. Yet if she had, she would have mailed the note. But no: Birdsong stole it before she had a chance to put it in the post probably.

Perhaps she was here after all. Really here.

If so they would see her; or die in the attempt.

Bandy brought out visiting cards; his own, Sterling's, and Hammond's.

"Send these up to the lady," he ordered blandly, "if you please."

Señor Domingo Abixtido drew back as if stung. "But no, Señor, it is the impossible. The lady make positively the orders no one should see, or

speak to her, of the gentleman variety. I cannot."

Bandy opened his pocketbook wide, displaying much shining gold and silver.

"But no, Señor, it is the honor of the Abixtido, since Aztec, very long of lineage. I cannot."

And the chorus somewhat in chagrin, it must be recorded, echoed, "Cannot!"

"The lady is beautiful?" Hammond grinned.

The chorus all shrugged their shoulders. Hammond's words and his manner had failed to produce the desired effect.

Bandy had a vague idea that young and elderly ladies were averse to the discussion of the charms of other fair ones, so he discreetly relied solely upon Señor Abixtido's verdict.

Doubtless, out of wholesome deference to the views of his household on this subject, the Señor descended from the Aztecs, shrugged his shoulders also, and said, "Ah, Señor, that is a matter for the preference. It is a lady of those who indeed must be admired always, if not for one thing, then for another." A reply which met the entire approval of his family and certainly might be rated as savoring of diplomacy.

"The lady is no doubt an American lady?" Mr. Sterling propounded graciously.

"Estados Unidos, Señor, I think so, but the luggage!" Their host's hands went up in the air.

"Ah, so heavy, so grand, the *cargadores* could scarcely lift!" The chorus was unanimous on that point too. "From Europe? ah, yes, to be sure; well-established? certainly it must be so: much boxes, bags, many of the labels of the hotels of France, Egypt and Spain."

"The lady's name was on the boxes, of course?" Sterling inquired alertly.

"Oh, but, yes, Señor, assuredly." All admitted this fact.

"And where is the lady's luggage? in the office, perhaps some of it?" Bandy's tone was almost caressing as he rose from his wicker chair.

"But, never! never Señor. In the apartment of the lady above; just the small one flight, with the excellent little balcony; having the stripe awnings and the jalousies from Europe. Immediately over the present head of the illustrious Señor who inquires."

Bandy valiantly advanced through the parterre of the chorus, and said as valiantly, "I will go up and knock upon the lady's door. She is a friend of ours. We must acquaint her with our presence." He was at the foot of the little flight of stairs, his hand upon the balustrade.

"But, no, Señor! Not so! Never!" the robust form of Señor Abixtido planted itself firmly between the three guardsmen and the stairs. The chorus, adhering strictly to a family life, kept close to its head, murmuring also.

"Never, never, never, not so."

"The lady is alone," continued the host. "The honor of the Abixtido protects her, Señor. She said, 'No one will I see.'" His voice was grandiloquent with the grandiloquence of Latin blood, however humble its estate.

"Ah, yes, it is the honor of the Abixtido always, always, Señores," from the whole chorus, and spoken with honest pride.

Bandy retreated apparently rounded up, but in his own mind quite determined to ignore the honor of the Abixtidos the very first chance he got.

The Señor and the Señora, also the five dark-eyed Señoritas, now went out to the kitchen to prepare those tortillas, those bananas fried in corn-husks; those adorable chickens stewed in pulque, which should slake the appetites of these gentlemen from Estados Unidos.

The trio of American men looked at each other when they got outside on the little balcony again, with quizzical eyes.

"See here!" said Hammond. "We are a damn fool lot."

"Certainly," admitted Mr. Bergh; "all Lady Peggy's men are." The tone was blithely recognizant of their estates.

"Complimentary to her ladyship," growled Mr. Sterling.

"You know what I mean," Mr. Bergh threw out testily.

"Sometimes we manage to, Bandy," Hammond rejoined.

"She's upstairs." After a pause, Bandy said this.

"I suppose she is," Hammond allowed, while the other two then rose from their wicker chairs, stepped off the veranda to the grassy plot, towards the thick fuchsia hedge, ten feet high, where roses interlaced with the magenta and purple bell-flowers; where the cacti grew as high as the fuchsias. It was a veritable thicket of perfume, black in the twilight, seemingly impenetrable, full of the tropic mystery that can't be dissociated from this part of the world after dark.

The stars were brighter, it looked to them, than any stars they had ever seen, make it Egypt, Italy, the Pole, or Honolulu, whichever one liked; and the vault appeared so near, as if a reach-out of the human hand could touch its velvety softness.

But the glance the guardsmen devoted to these beauties of nature was but cursory; their triplicate gaze soon enough fastened itself upon certain upper windows, the windows of the room Abixtido had told them was occupied by the lady from Estados Unidos.

Even as they gazed upwards they beheld a shadow crossing behind the curtains; a shadow that was indistinct, but also most definitely and unmistakably feminine — slender, of medium height and graceful motion.

"It's Peggy!" whispered Bandy jubilantly, clutching at both his comrades.

"Her ladyship!" gasped Sterling, catching at Hammond's shoulder.

Then in a forlorn rebound, Bandy added, looking at the others.

"One can't tell, boys; it might be any woman."

"To be sure," Hammond admitted, and their transports cooled a bit as each felt the narrowing justice of Mr. Bergh's qualifications.

"We must get to know, sometime, for certain," Sterling exclaimed petulantly.

"If we stop here long enough, she must come out of that room," Bandy asserted. "She can't live and die in there, that's sure."

"Look here, boys," Hammond spoke out clearly. "If her ladyship doesn't want to see us, I mean to see anyone, we can't force ourselves. We hadn't figured about that outlook, had we?"

"True, no we hadn't, but — Look!" Bandy cast a decidedly romantic pair of eyes upwards.

The trio beheld a hand, white? to be sure; with flashing rings? yes; thrust out to draw in the jalousie of that upper window.

"Peg's hand, I swear!" Bandy was palpitating with the exhilaration born of the glimpse.

"Yes, Peg's hand," Hammond seconded. "I'd know it in a million!"

"I hope so," was Sterling's depressing third-in-hand.

"If we only had that damned Birdsong here I'd—" Hammond was proceeding, when—

"Aha-ha-ha—" A Latin wail sounded out incessantly from the throat of Señor Abixtido, who had noiselessly approached over the grass to the veranda, fetching his tray on his head.

The host sighed deeply, then more deeply; then he spoke.

"The Birdsong! Señor! Señor! But, the chicken is accomplished to a great perfection by my oldest daughter; if you will condescend to occupy yourself with it? We shall serve it to your excellencies out here on the piazza. Yes?"

"To be sure. Capital! Charming!" the trio agreed heartily.

The chorus then bore in, or rather out, the feast; they spread it upon the round table on the piazza; they set the chairs; and the guests sat down to one of those inimitably toothsome repasts which the Mexican woman can prepare.

"You know Mr. Birdsong then, Señor?" queried Bandy with a jocose accent.

"But, yes, Señor. The Señor Birdsong make away last November, with the dowry of my second daughter, eh? Poor Dolores!" This reply was couched in anything but jocose terms.

Dolores, being one of the chorus of course, wept noiselessly but well assisted by her five companions.

"He steal the two ponies and the brown bull

Dolores have for make possible the marriage. Ah, the Birdsong!" Señor Domingo Abixtido shook his fist at an imaginary desperado lurking in the hedge.

All the chorus to a unit made the same threatening motions.

"We had Birdsong this morning, Señor." Hammond said this in a leisurely way as he assisted himself to potatoes.

"You have Birdsong!" Abixtido let fall the dish of gravy in a completely reckless fashion; his mouth and eyes wider open than possibly they had ever been before in his life.

The chorus sat down on the grass cross legged and sang a triumphant hymn in their own liquid language.

"Birdsong! the desperate man! the murderer! the price upon the head! the Tucson Terror! Ah, my angelical family, you hear?" Abixtido turned triumphantly to his wife and children. "Dolores is avenged. Señor, where have you put Birdsong?" The women sprang to their feet again, each crossing herself devoutly and all clustered around Mr. Hammond eagerly.

"We let him go, Señor." It was laconically but self-contemptuously uttered. Hammond put himself modestly down about this date as a consummate ass, which he wasn't.

"Santa Maria!" came from Señor Abixtido's lips as a solo.

298 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"Santissima Maria!" came from the chorus in sorrow and in anger as they rose, spooned up the gravy, and shook their five derisive heads, behind the chairs of their honorable guests.

"To let the go of Birdsong! Poor Dolores!" cried the maternal Abixtido. "So it is: one girl is make a destiny to marry, another not so." And they all wept, including poor Dolores herself.

Señor Abixtido and his amiable family, then, all shortly left the trio to discuss their viands as best suited their tastes; when it came to the coffee and cigars there had been arrived at a firm decision to stop at the Hotel Xochitl until my Lady Peggy emerged from that upper room. If it meant a solid year's experience with Abixtido and his chorus, the guardsmen argued, that in the cause of her ladyship, they could and would stand for the sojourn.

Bandy had voiced this, and they had all pledged it, when Mr. Hammond, his glass high up, exclaimed, "Here's to her ladyship, wherever she is!"

"Here's to her ladyship! Wherever she is!" Bandy echoed.

"Here's to her ladyship wherever she is." Sterling triplicated with vehemence.

The three tall crystals clinked musically in the little silence that followed this toast.

Then there certainly came a stir in that fuchsia hedge.

The guardsmen's six alert eyes shot straight to the stir place.

There was another stealthy movement over there; there was, too, surely, a crackle of the cactus.

Then they beheld, by the flicker of the lanterns swinging above their heads, a figure just faintly outlined amid the great flowery branches; it was a slim, tall-appearing, human figure.

CHAPTER XXIX

In which the Captain takes off his cap to her ladyship's shadow too, and at last gets a glimpse of the tall, slim Barkeep

THIS scribe will not attempt to portray, analyze, or reckon up, the mental hieroglyphics through which the brain of Jack Churchill tortured itself as he rode the Colonel's Brown Bess down South way, over the Border line, and into Mexico; then further down along to San Zucato.

Jack struck that little town about eleven P. M.
“She's there.” That was in his ears always, always; she was alive.

That, after all, was the sum total of the gist of life. That she lived. That she was in the world he was in, was the world and high heaven both, to him.

If he attained sight of her, would she receive or speak with him?

Staring at him blankly from the past was that hour in the upper room at Walsh's; the hour when he had seen her lying drenched behind the calico curtains; when she had refused to be made Kent Gratiot's wife; had refused to be his.

The Captain would have given something

pretty big just then to have gotten sight and speech of the young Barkeep too.

Before the soldier-man met Lady Peggy — yes, he had learned to call her so already in his thoughts — he wanted to get the plucky boy's explanation of her ladyship's garments in the ice-box; he had a feeling that the Barkeep knew a lot about her ladyship's vicissitudes; and just when, and how, she had hidden herself from Gratiot and where she had been hiding herself from everyone ever since.

Hiding from Gratiot. Doubtless that was it. Certainly Peggy, in some sort of incomprehensible straits, had left her belongings at the shack. Gratiot himself had perhaps used the ice-box as a wardrobe.

Anyway Jack was confident that Peg was eluding Gratiot's persecutions.

Gratiot, of course, had ridden off that time as a blind. Gratiot had come back, and that young Barkeep had, meanwhile, helped Peggy to a place of safety.

Yes, that might be it.

But Peggy's jewels and keepsakes in the possession of the three travelers, wrested they said from the dare-devil Birdsong.

What then had not her ladyship been through! The Captain was sure-minded to find that slim lad soon and do good things for him.

He owed him two. For her ladyship and for

himself. Jack knew his debt at Walsh's was the debt of life.

As he loped along, leisurely perforce, since, the next day being the fiesta of the Blessing of the Animals, it appeared as if every inhabitant of the town were abroad upon the streets. Every path was cluttered already in preparation for the ceremony, with strings of burros, cows, bulls, cats and dogs; pigs, chickens, sheep, canary birds, parrots, monkeys, horses, turkeys; each and all undergoing at their owners' hands a strange transformation of color by way of paint. There were weird pink steeds, blue cats, crimson burros and green dogs; browsing, purring, calling, and barking in the gardens, yards, highways, and byways. Each family was busily engaged decorating its live stock for the occasion, and everyone of the multitude of beasts and birds was accentuating the ceremony by his or her own particular cry, call, cackle, whinny, chatter, song, gobble, bellow, baa, moo, and bow-wow.

It was indeed a pandemonium in which the Captain suddenly found himself involved, but into its intricacies his piercing eyes shot hither and yon, seeking the young Barkeep. He had a presentiment, or call it what one wills, that he should discover that Barkeep in this merry, noisy, jostling throng of man, woman, beast and bird; and strange as it may appear, now that he knew Peggy was safe, that curious diffidence which not infre-

quently besets the bravest man, took possession of the soldier-man.

Meantime, under the soft flare of the myriads of electric lights, the incessant procession wound and doubled and twisted and turned, as the painters and decorators, brushes in hand, nimbly capered after their living canvases. For only about one-half the creatures were tethered; the major part belonged to the peons of all the tribes, who come fetching their live stock down each year for the blessing, to the nearest town. The public streets are their only refuge, with a *rebosa* for their sheet, their mattress, and their pillow, alike.

Churchill wound his way skillfully enough among the motley, searching in every group for the Barkeep boy; half laughing at his own persistency too, and drawing nearer by slow almost reluctant steps to the Hotel Xochitl.

Where she was.

He crossed the little plaza at the imminent risk of many Mexican ladies' lives, since they would not get out of the way of Brown Bess's heels; and, as he rode along, he remembered very well how the regiment had merrily bivouacked right there; he even recalled having had supper seated in that exact spot on the broad veranda of the hostelry where the three guardsmen were just at that precise moment having theirs. Jack recalled the great fuchsia hedge, the dense thickets, the long arbor. The balcony, too, up at the second

story; it was about as high, he calculated, as the stoop roof from which the Barkeep had swung himself after his daring shot in his (the Captain's) behalf away from Birdsong's wrath, at Walsh's shack.

Churchill reined in to a standstill before the gate of the pretty garden; he glanced from his saddle over to those upper windows. It must be, he argued, behind those very jalousies that Lady Peggy now harbored, since those were the best rooms in the little house. As he stared a shadow, a woman's shadow, slowly crossed; the outline was indistinct through the haze of the lace curtains, but it was absolutely feminine. He lifted his cap from his head. That must be Peggy. His heart almost stood still.

Peggy, Mrs. Gratiot; Payne; Lady Peggy de Bohun. Which was it?

'A pebble's throw from him. But, to his worshiping mind any star in the firmament was nearer! Then there came the rebound. All the reluctance vanished. He was just the famished elementary man bound to find and hold the woman he loved.

Churchill let go.

For the first time in many hours he threw the tension off.

And for a few moments, he just sat in his saddle watching that feminine shadow cross back and

forth. Amid the turmoil of the throngs, the cries of the animals, the tinkle of a thousand guitars, the babble of several thousand Latin tongues, the soldier-man remained luxuriantly basking his spirit in the mere idea of her nearness.

It was riches, sweetness, rest, to merely watch her shadow; to know that presently he could seek her; he knew she would see him? Yes, Jack Churchill felt sure of so much as that. In any event he would compel it.

He gave a big sigh, as he drew his gaze away from the now darkened casement.

Her ladyship put out her light, but never in this world could she extinguish the flame that burned in the heart of the soldier-man.

The Captain turned his head toward the hedge at his side, because there was a sudden rustling in there; he heard it distinctly; so did his mount. Doubtless some reluctant pussy-cat or hen objecting to further decoration had fled deep in for security.

The electrics, swung on a wire across from the veranda to the thicket, flickered down just then, leaving the whole place for a few brief moments with only the luminance from the swinging candle lanterns. This made an eerie sort of an effect, for the colors of the lanterns were blue and yellow.

By this occult radiance the soldier-man beheld

the tall, slim figure he sought. The young Barkeep was crouching back in these flowery branches.

"Barkeep!" he cried out. "Barkeep! I say, this is the man whose life you saved! Hello! there, hello!" Churchill shouted it out recklessly enough.

To slip from his mount as he spoke, and to crash into the thicket, as he kept up hellowing, was the work of a few seconds. No one helped, hindered, or even heard the Captain's recognition of Walsh's factotum; there was too much else going on in San Zucato that night for any mere personal affair to intervene.

In the dimness, with the thorns pricking at his face and hands, Jack still was able to chase that tall, slim figure; it was a bit of hide-and-seek play, lasting perhaps only thirty seconds; he had even contrived to catch between his fingers the feel of a woolen sleeve; it was a very fat sleeve he noted too, and he also observed the soft sleek touch of what seemed more like human hair than anything else he could think of, somewhere about that fat sleeve.

But there was not a word uttered by the human being, whom the Captain pushed hard, caught, lost; it seemed a will-o'-the-wisp to him. Illusive as a firefly. Now, he had a firm grip at last; on a jacket flap. Then the next second he did not have it. There was a deep palpitating breath, no syllable.

Only a shot.

Then quicker breathing, a jerk, a bound and a dash through the hedge; and Churchill alone, with a handful of leaves in his grasp.

CHAPTER XXX

In which on the eve of a triplicate duel a shriek is heard from the upper room in which her ladyship is believed to be hidden.

THAT is, there had not been a word that Churchill was able to dissociate from the general and intense hubbub around him.

But it is, nevertheless, true that, just as soon as he had descried and identified the Barkeep, the three guardsmen had also descried and identified the renowned Mr. Billy Birdsong's slim genteel figure in that thicket.

It is equally a fact that the trio had shouted coincidently with the Captain's own cry; that they had with abundant lung power, in fact, yelled unanimously.

“Birdsong! Birdsong! Birdsong!”

“Come out of there, or we'll shoot you dead. You've lied to us. The lady isn't here.” Sterling said this, for he had not a vast faith that the shadow above was Peggy's own. It might be anyone else's.

“Here goes!” Bandy fired, in the air it is true, and yet low enough to have singed Mr. Birdsong's hair if he hadn't opportunely moved his head.

But the shot was quite lost as had been all they all four had said, in the wild babel that prevailed, and possessed even the echoes of San Zucato that night before the great fiesta. Those on the road paid no attention. Those in the thicket?

Well, one of them bounded away and the Captain walked his horse slowly over the grass-plot and into the very midst of the guardsmen's somewhat confused supper table. He beheld the trio standing, rather stunned, it must be confessed, staring blankly at the hedge he had himself emerged from.

"He certainly was there!" Bandy was saying.

Neither of them recognized Churchill yet; the electrics were still down, and the beautiful little tropical garden just a spot of sweetness and of shadows. But the Captain recognized their voices perfectly.

"Sure," responded the Captain, "I had hold of his sleeve," and, he truthfully added, "of his hair, I should think." Neither of the three identified the stranger's voice at all; he was a new man at the hotel and he was evidently in pursuit of someone too.

"Did you?" Sterling cried out excitedly.

"Are you after him too?" from Hammond's deep voice.

"Yes, I want to see him especially," was the soldier-man's rejoinder.

"We're all in the same boat then. There are

a good many more of us too, up and down both sides of the boundary, I reckon." Mr. Bergh tried to speak with jocularity, and returned to the coffee which had been brewed by one (or all) of the Abixtido chorus.

"How's that, sir, may I ask?" The Captain was enjoying the period of his indistinguishability very much indeed, and counting on a lively wake-up when it should arrive, with the return of the electric power.

As has been said, strange as it is to relate, although it's not by any means uncommon, his goal once in sight, this man's very life's happiness at stake, he could allow himself to be halted at her threshold, and he really somewhat relished the procrastination.

"How's that!" echoed Bandy. "Well, sir, Billy Birdsong the Tucson Terror's been in active demand any time for the past five years, we learn, by both the Republics, U. S. and Mexico. And he has proved his title very clear to us."

"Birdsong!" the Captain now echoed in his turn. "My dear sir," at this juncture the electrics all went up, "that slim lad in there was not Birdsong!" All four men stared hard and in active curiosity at each other.

The trio to a man then regarded the Captain.

The Captain regarded the trio, thinking them to be the unlawful possessors of Peg's jewels, but he took off his cap to them all the same. They

did not return the courtesy and, Hammond's tone was not that of a veiled prophet as he spoke.

"Well, sir, since you are, by your own account to us, the spy that a small branch of the army is looking up about now, perhaps your trying to prove an alibi for the Tucson Terror isn't so very surprising." Both Sterling and Bergh gave wordless endorsement to this incisive and strictly logical speech of their associate's.

But Churchill only laughed.

"My dear sirs," he went on, "that was the Barkeep from Walsh's; the lad I told you I was looking for. Gentlemen, this is the Colonel's horse. Gentlemen I—" the soldier-man actually was laughing in his sleeves, both of them.

"Birdsong number two!" cried Bandy, jumping to a quite righteous conclusion, which although Churchill had not foreseen it, he continued to laugh through, very obligingly; then he said to them:

"The fact is, gentlemen, I'm not quite as bad as that. I'm not the spy!" The soldier-man spoke bluntly, humorously it is true, but quite conclusively. The humor struck the listeners but failed to convince them.

"Clearly if you are not the spy, you are Birdsong's pal!" With decision this came from Sterling's firm lips.

Churchill replied, "No, I'm not that either exactly. I'm here, looking for—" There was

quite a pause, and why the three men at the table didn't cut it short with a pistol, neither one of them could say.

Then the horseman added quietly:

"Lady Peggy de Bohun."

"The devil you are!" All three of the New Yorkers were up in arms again, and sore tried in their several minds.

"Lady Peggy's here," said the Captain with easy bland assurance.

"What have you to do with her ladyship?" Sterling asked in sheer blank amazement.

"Quite a lot," the Captain replied nonchalantly, as he dismounted and led his horse to a tie-post.

Then he added, "I'm stopping here until I see her ladyship."

No one made any reply.

Why?

Because they all four heard a stealthy sound; none of the open, clear racket of the hilarious people of San Zucato, but a cautious rustle; it was slow and painstaking; it was above their heads on the upper balcony. They discerned a slip on the slanting roof; a recovery; then a profound silence so far as their immediate neighborhood was concerned.

Otherwhere, in the whole little town the uproar continued, deafening, multiplied, added to; as pilgrims kept arriving by the dozens from the hills

around about; from the little valleys, and from the miserable poverty-stricken haunts in the hollows.

"Now look here, whoever you are, sir," Bandy himself spoke to Churchill with frank positive indications of fair play, but with iron play also. "We're here in good faith, bound to stop, too, until we see her ladyship, and return to her the jewels you, or Birdsong stole. You are, you said, a spy; we say you are a thief, a rascal, and we'll all be pleased to meet you to-morrow, and have it out. I'm the fellow that beat Andy Chipman, the British light-weight champion at his own game, over in Doncaster last year, so we don't make it gloves, but anything else you damn please!" Mr. Bergh spoke his speech with impetuous gallant emphasis and all he said was true.

"Shall it be guns?" Hammond interrogated.

"I fancy we'd better have it all out now," remarked Sterling pointedly, "and here, as this gentleman seems a trifle obscure, and rather given to disappearing from present conditions."

"As you like," was the Captain's ready answer. "Make it guns or gloves or — fists," he added amiably. "Anything to oblige all of you. Say we make it all three? I'll take each of you in rotation."

"Well, it might pass the time and —"

Mr. Bandy Bergh never finished this particular sentence.

314 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

A shriek, shrill, poignant, terrorized, pierced their ears. It was a woman's shriek of agony and unparalleled fright.

It came from the upper room of the Hotel Xochitl.

CHAPTER XXXI

"It was a mouse"

MISS PAMELA BURGOYNE, in a state of mind which cannot be described by any such maladroit scribe as this one, had sought, had found, and had put up, on the previous day at the Hotel Xochitl, in San Zucato, Mexico. Miss Pam had taken the upper rooms and, by prepayment, had ensured herself against any possible interruptions from anyone who might trace her whereabouts, and seek her for news of her willful niece.

That very morning, as it happened, finding herself almost insane from perplexity and anxiety; not being able to get through to Mexico City where she had friends in the legal profession as well as in the Army; not daring to return to Punty's and feeling certain that Peggy had adventured somewhere in queer and awful regions, as was her bent, Miss Pam, unwilling to cope, even in mind, with the horrible possibilities of "Mrs. Gratiot," had telephoned to the Colonel.

The Colonel had, from the first hour of their meeting, appealed to her spinster imagination, as needing that which he had not; namely, womanly companionship and care; hence, to the Colonel

Miss Burgoyne at last turned naturally in her despair.

The Colonel, over the 'phone (indeed, Thorsby had seen him holding this very conversation), had advised "calmness" and keeping where she was; warfare, he reminded the lady, was in the air; bullets were flying galore, and Miss Pam, he added, should, "for the sake of those to whom she was dear," remain stationary for the present. He himself would see what could be done in the matter of Mrs. Gratiot. He would put men on the trail. Miss Pam should be easy in mind owing to this pleasant chat over the wire, and she was partially so. As has been seen the Colonel had been able, later on, to send the alleged Mr. Bird-song on his way to San Zucato; and owing to this same agreeable chat over the wires, Miss Pam had experienced the joy of the Colonel's tardy, but sweet confession, which trickled with amazing pleasantness through the terrors of her anxiety.

She had been able that night, notwithstanding the turmoil without, to close her jalousies with her own fair hands; she had crossed and recrossed the room making very pleasing, alluring and picturesque phantoms for those three deluded guardsmen below in the garden, also for Churchill, to behold and dwell fondly upon, each according to his own special fancy. She had also been able to cast herself upon her couch and to sink

into that slumber, which is always sweet when soothed for either sex, by appreciation, of a certain quality, from the other.

Miss Pam then had slept soundly? Indeed she had. The Colonel's authoritative assurance had proved a wonderful lullaby to her maiden mind and eyes.

In fact she had slept so soundly, that it appeared to her to be in her dreams, that she heard, penetrating through the general clangor of the little town, a soft footfall on her balcony. This was doubtless a cat fleeing from a paint brush; or a wind-blown branch of the rose-tree. Then Miss Pam dreamed on of a touch upon the jalousie: mayhap the cat's tail swishing as she sought the sleeping bird? Then Miss Pam dreamed that the casement rattled! Was it the paint-brush or the claws of the cat, at the casement as well? Miss Pam sat up straightly.

No cat can rattle a casement after this fashion, for the rattling went on. Miss Pam sat up more straightly in bed; her cap was awry; and its pink bow, which had lately made such a charming, and beguiling, and satisfactory profile for the three guardsmen, and also for the Captain, stood upright, as its nearly paralyzed wearer beheld the sash rise very slowly: then a human head thrust in. It was then a tall, thin, slim, living being who jumped over into Miss Pam's room.

Then Miss Pamela Burgoyne emitted the

shriek which has already been veraciously recorded.

Then, as the shriek had barely ceased echoing up the chimney, the Captain, with a most alert action swung himself up on Miss Pam's balcony. The three guardsmen not to be behind hand, followed suit, the quartette arriving just in time to see the casement pushed down, and to hear the catch snap; to listen to the wild calls, shouts and exclamations of Señor Domingo Abixtido and his whole chorus from below; summoned, as they had been, from the exhilarating labor of painting the burros a beautiful Chinese pink with vivid green ears, by the intense, terrified shriek of the lady whose name they wouldn't reveal.

The Señor, beholding the cavaliers from Estados Unidos on the upper balcony, instantly put the gun, he, of course, never was without, into threatening commission. He stood firmly below and spoke up without a thought of danger or of fear.

"Descend, whosoever you are, or I kill. It is Abixtido who speaks, and he does not wait for the answer of the bullet; he fires if the Señores do not come down." He could not discern who they were, but he stood his ground surrounded by the chorus, among whom ambled undisturbed, the partially finished burros.

Suddenly Dolores of the chorus, exclaimed,

" Maybe it is the Birdsong!" And her voice was full of terror and dismay.

Bandy quickly responded, " No, it isn't, but he's up here somewhere." They were prowling cautiously over the roof, all four of them, to no purpose.

Sterling found it wise to inform their host who it was up on the veranda roof, really; but at the fourth individual he balked, merely remarking, " There is also up here with us, Abixtido, another traveler, a new arrival."

The new arrival said, " We will come down, Abixtido."

They all came down, more or less gracefully, whereupon the Señor and his family fell upon their knees and implored their pardon for mistaking such honorable and splendid gentlemen for thieves and robbers, etc., etc.

Also imploring a gracious clemency from the newly arrived guest, whose mount the innkeeper quickly sized up for its considerable worth; all of which the Captain cut in quarters at once, by speeding indoors and saying on the way,

" There are thieves and robbers up there now, though, and I'll get them, or I am not who I am!" He was bounding up the staircase three at a time, and he was certainly followed, none the less valorously by the trio, each one of whom devoutly wished himself in Churchill's foremost

place, although neither of them thought of him as Churchill to be sure. They regarded him as one of Birdsong's able coadjutors. On one point known all were united. That shriek was from Peggy's throat. That piercing scream unmistakably Peggy's own.

Who could be the robber?

Birdsong. All four were united, in mind at least, on that point too; doubtless in quest of the remainder of her ladyship's jewels.

Birdsong was camping in that room with Peggy! The Captain had this awful surmise as he knocked at the door. He spoke; he also turned the knob which indeed failed to respond. He exclaimed, "Birdsong, if you shoot you're a dead man!" The Captain, boosted in the enterprise by Hammond, then administered a kick to the door.

On the other side of which, just prior to this interesting crisis, and at the close of Miss Pam's shriek, her ladyship had said, "Aunt Pam, it's I, Peggy!" She had kneeled down, clasping her aunt; she had showed her her cropped head, and the long trail of her severed tresses which was hanging from her left sleeve just as it had been a few minutes earlier when the soldier-man had felt its singular sleekness in his fingers.

And what had Miss Burgoyne said?

Miss Burgoyne cried out, "Peggy, are you married?"

And Lady Peg answered, "No, Aunt Pam, I am not."

"Peggy, do you wish you were?" It was wistfully, tenderly uttered.

"No, I don't. I'm your own Peg, safe and sound, but sadly needing soap and water, and —"

The battalion of four as has been related had now reached the door of that particular room.

Her ladyship rushed across and bolted it before hand could be laid upon latch.

As the Captain had addressed his remark to Birdsong, her ladyship had whispered to her aunt, "Speak to them, tell them you made a mistake in screaming so." This counsel was somewhat obscured for Miss Pam's ears by the active boot-heels of the Captain at work on the door.

"Tell them to go away!" Peg whispered on to her chaperone.

"Go away!" Miss Pam said obediently, but quivering in every nerve.

The Captain shouted out, "Never, until we get the robber."

The three guardsmen, Señor Abixtido, and his chorus cried out all in one voice. "Never."

The Captain went on with lungs and heels.

"Birdsong shall not intimidate you. We will break down the door and rescue you."

Peggy urged Miss Pam in a tense whisper of real alarm as the Captain's fists were added to his heels, thus,

"Laugh!"

Miss Pam tried to laugh but she failed lamentably; it sounded like a sob of fright.

Bandy called out, "She's being choked in there. I hear the gurgle!"

Then the quartette unanimously and frantically kicked with the intention of kicking down the door, an occurrence that appeared imminent from the give-away of the wood.

Peggy: "Tell them you were only frightened. They must not get in and find me or see me here. Shriek." Her ladyship was more in terror than she had been 2,000 feet up in Bandy's airship.

Miss Pam shrieked with a will. "Stop! stop! I was only frightened."

The Captain sang out, "We know it."

"By whom?" Bandy asked in the same breath, and he asked it with authority. Miss Pam looked at Peg, as her lips framed "Whom?"

There was an almost imperceptible pause which both the Señor and Sterling obligingly filled in this manner.

Sterling said: "We'd better go a bit slow; he's terrorizing her; he might kill her."

The Señor added reflectively, "There is always the American chimney above, we can descend it." He looked up as he spoke, and it would seem as if his preference were for the chim-

ney, rather than for an active hand-to-hand encounter with Birdsong.

While within the room, Peggy desperately whispered to her aunt, "Tell them it was a mouse!"

Miss Pam then spoke out with her lips at the keyhole, boldly. "Please gentlemen, whoever you are, go away. I am so sorry, it — was — a mouse."

CHAPTER XXXII

In which the Captain again knocks at a door, believing her ladyship will open, while the guardsmen wait at the same door as well

THERE was no gainsaying the word of a lady.
“A mouse” it had to be.

The trio, also the Captain, likewise Señor Abixtido and his chorus, had to content themselves with the rodent version of the mysterious creature of the thicket, the veranda, the window, and the room.

It is quite as much of a fact that Churchill spent the remainder of that night pacing around the four sides of the Hotel Xochitl; he inspected its windows and its many doors; its American chimney as well. The three guardsmen likewise kept him an alert, if somewhat aloof, and somewhat suspicious company.

No one quitted the little hotel that night: of that they were positive, and the morning of the great fiesta found her ladyship’s adorers in exactly the same plight as the one of the previous day. Dense, intense, straining ignorance.

They were ignorant of her ladyship’s where-

abouts, and they were equally positive Birdsong (at least some of them were) was not only an expert thief, but quite as successful a liar.

What then should they do? To stop on there seemed like cowardice. What lady was that one who had talked with them last night? This was a question each man severally put to himself, and the trio to each other. It was not Peggy's voice, and yet the tones sounded familiar.

The Captain took his coffee alone, attended by Dolores, and he presently decided to go out reconnoitring: it rather stuck in Jack's mind that that shadow he had watched had been Peggy's; it must be recalled that the shadow had been made before Miss Pam's cap got disarranged by the capricious and often malicious adversities of sleep.

But yet, it was not Peggy's voice which had made answers to them after the shriek.

The shriek had certainly sounded like Peg's voice, but all women's shrieks bore, it must be allowed, somewhat of a familiar resemblance to each other.

Who then was the mysterious occupant of the upper room?

Why would she not descend to the dining hall, or see anyone?

Why was her name held secret?

It must be Peggy!

The guardsmen too believed her ladyship to

be above in the upper room. They stopped around the Hotel Xochitl.

The Captain, galloped off towards the hills, and he asked himself many questions too. He could not discredit the Colonel. True, she might have been at San Zucato and have left San Zucato.

Who had the thief been? for thief he was convinced there was. How, when, where, would he get sight of or speech with her ladyship now?

Why had the young Barkeep eluded him last night in the thicket? Was it the Barkeep who had climbed to the roof and been let in, or escaped? Who was the lady who had answered their queries and kicks? Who had declared the cause of her alarm to be "a mouse"? That was not Peggy!

What the deuce was the matter with all things anyway!

Come what might, the Captain made up his mind that he would go back to the Hotel Xochitl by evening, and, if the lady of the upper room had not shown up, he would force an entrance, if he had to defy the whole of Mexico, and all the ladies and all the mice incarcerated in that or any other room.

The three guardsmen meantime were equally puzzled, and clung to their determination to keep to the hostelry of the Señor. They all stuck pertinaciously to pessimism; they felt sure that Bird-song was in that upper room, and that the lady

was a pal of his; that both knew where Lady Peggy was. That was their version of the mystery which was secluded above their heads.

Which showed their astuteness and ingenuity, and general composite lack of imagination.

They decided to go forth and view the fiesta too, but to return at sunset presently and then they would bombard that upper chamber in the teeth and nails, of fifty mice, if need be, and drag forth beyond a doubt, Birdsong, and his feminine confederate, and obtain knowledge of her ladyship's actual whereabouts, if need be by way of bullets. They never recollect, such are men in love, that Birdsong might escape in their absence, with the lady and the knowledge of Peg's abiding place both, in his keeping!

The soldier-man certainly did not especially enjoy his promenade on the back of the Colonel's Brown Bess. The route he wandered into, lay over the little green-blue hills, not very far away; it stretched across rude little bridges; it meandered through hamlets, all pitilessly shot to shivers by the fighting. He rode past ruin, havoc and desolation; but it was always, "Peggy, Peggy," whichever way he set his pace, and to him the havoc and desolation beat at his heart.

For her. For her; always for her.

To the three guardsmen the path seemed jollier. They were threading their threefold way among the gayly embellished animals as, when

the bells rang out, their owners marshaled, coerced, prodded them, to the churchyard as fast as could be, to receive the sprinkling of the holy water, and the blessing of the priests. The bands played the favorite airs of the comic operas, meantime! and all the guitars of Christendom it seemed, tankled in merry tune.

It was all quite novel for the guardsmen. They knew the rest of the round world pretty well, but just that little corner called Mexico, and that scrap labeled San Zucato, they hadn't seen before.

Yes, to be sure, the trio was there, in the midst of the fiesta, close beside the Señor and his portly spouse, also the five graduated Señoritas. Dolores, as was her right, being the oldest, was first of the line; she was leading a blue lamb with brilliantly gilded feet, while a cavalier with a sombrero of felt adorned with solid silver tassels was assiduously assisting her; the presence of this cavalier gave assurance to the parental eye that, even despite the ravages of Mr. Birdsong, poor Dolores was perhaps still going to be fortunate!

The trio enjoyed the picturesque seriousness of it all. They even openly said how Peggy would be amused at it! They were serious chaps, but you see they were hopeless chaps and sufficiently philosophers to allow of harmless diversion between the more active matters of capturing ban-

dits and discovering a lady, neither of them could hope to call his own.

Back at the hotel the peon stablemen, the *cargadores*, even, to be sure, the little, mostly naked, boys who fetched water and soap and towels to the rooms, and caused Miss Pam daily spasms, were all gone to make fiesta.

The Hotel Xochitl was empty and deserted, save for the occupant of the upper rooms, who had consolingly assured the excellent Señora that, "nothing would please her more than to be left quite alone that very day. That the fright of the mouse was past, quite entirely; that she had no fears of robbers or loneliness." In reality Miss Pam's adjurations to the head of the Abixtido chorus to go forth and distract herself, were almost, it might be said with some justice, suspiciously vehement.

But the Señora was not suspicious. She went away, pleased to have noted that all the breakfast that had been served to the elegant old lady, had been eaten that morning; a thing which had not before happened; that even the coffee-pot was empty; and not a scrap of food remained on the tray.

"Perhaps," simple soul, she said to her five children, "perhaps it is that the mouse which so affrighted the pleasant excellency of the upper room, has also devoured the morsels, every one?"

"Perhaps it had," allowed the chorus, who

were not thoroughly acquainted with all species of mice, but nevertheless perfectly willing to let it go at that.

But by and by the sun had set; the fiesta was over, the streets, strewn with ribbons of all hues, were partly deserted; the voices of the beasts and fowls were mercifully stilled; the bands of music were hushed; even the guitars had been laid aside. The fat and lean priests snored; the bellringer lay on his straw mat, drinking more pulque than usual, owing to his overexertions on behalf of the blessed Saint in honor of whom the multitudes had assembled and painted their cattle.

The Señor rolled his cigarettes: the Señora crocheted her shawl as she sat on the step; the Señoritas, four of them at least, lay in the fringed gay hammocks and peered at the fifth.

For Dolores stood at the gate, and above Dolores' head there was — supported, certainly by another head — that superb felt sombrero with the real solid silver tassels!

Dolores was laughing, they all heard her; for the first time since Birdsong had stolen her dowry.

Then the other ladies of the chorus laughed too, softly in tune with the beauty of the exquisite approaching night, the exquisite dawn of love, for Dolores and the cavalier of the real silver tassels.

It would, no doubt, be their turn some day to stand at the gate under the broad shadow of a felt sombrero, or even of one of straw, for always

down Mexique way, the felt sombrero is a sign of riches; but a girl is content if it be merely straw.

Along about then, the three guardsmen returned, having supped at an inn up the country road a ways.

The Captain too presently rode into the yard.

All four were equally imbued with precisely the same plan of action.

The trio marked the Captain's arrival with no show of pleasure; they spoke together and aside in a low tone, with the result that Bandy, who adored falling into conversation, as he called it, with anyone about anything, was of course the one who advanced to Churchill, and planting himself firmly in front of Jack, asked:

"What are you hanging around here yet for?" and Mr. Bergh propounded his query in most unmitigated and savage disapproval.

"Do you really want to fight?" was the reply of the soldier-man.

"I don't mind," was Bandy's rejoinder. "I told you so last evening."

"Gloves," the Captain said decisively.

"All right. By and by. One moment; first, are you going to make any more attempts about seeing the lady up there?" Bandy cast his eye to the balcony.

"Yes." Jack nodded with easy affirmativeness.

"What are you going to do? I mean, how are you going to make it? Get the lady to open the door?"

"Wait and see," Churchill said bluntly.

"Well, now, see here, whatever your name is! it's this way. We don't care a damn who you are, in reality. You were told when we first met you that we, the three of us, were all Lady Peggy's own; not that she ever specialized anyone of us. If you know her at all, you are aware that that isn't her way. Now, you seem to be a gentleman, and a spy, and a scoundrel, all three; yet we can't quite size you up along all those lines. We believe her ladyship's up in that room. If you will identify yourself to our satisfaction; if you say that she has ever shown you a preference, why, we'll step out. Of course, if she has done this, it's you she'd see, and not us: we don't count," he went on humbly. "All we want, at least—" Mr. Bergh hesitated and Mr. Hammond was good enough to piece him out.

"All we can expect is, her happiness. If you are it, O.K." It was curious, but these three men stood instinctively in line before the fourth man, and the atmosphere was splendid with just big real manliness, with girl for its urge and spur.

"Just give us some inkling of her inclinations; assure us positively with proof that she is safe, and we'll quit," Sterling spoke thickly through his cigar smoke.

The soldier-man put out both hands; he wished he had three just then.

"You're the finest lot ever. I'm under a big cloud with you fellows, and with many others. It's breaking through, though. It was for her sake." Then he paused. "No; for all I know, any one of you has as good a chance as I have, every bit."

The trio sighed in a species of relief.

"But," Churchill went on, "I'm going up to her door, and if it's within the power of man and a gentleman I'm going to get sight of the lady that's on the other side of that wood we nearly kicked in last night. There is no reason why you shouldn't all follow."

They did; and for some queer reason the four ran noiselessly on tiptoe up the little steep staircase of the Hotel Xochitl.

But what of those within?

Within, her ladyship's quick ears had heard them, and her ladyship, having promptly advised Miss Burgoyne what to do, left off the sorting of her frocks, in which occupation she had been engaged, and put herself into the closet, taking care however to leave the closet door a bit ajar.

Then the knock came from outside the upper room.

CHAPTER XXXIII

In which the guardsmen and the Captain salute the lady of the shadows; in which Bandy strikes his colors, and the guardsmen set flight for New York

MISS PAM opened the room door wide (the closet door was behind the room door).

Miss Pam was smiling, sedate and amiable, as she thus revealed herself, and no one but herself, to their eight astounded eyes.

"It's you! and you? Oh, Mr. Hammond, Mr. Bergh, Captain Churchill! and Mr. Sterling," the chaperone exclaimed delightedly and remorsefully too. "Oh, that mouse! I am so sorry to have disturbed you. When did you all arrive? This is such a quaint, charming town."

They were all, for the second, staggered; especially as each one of them made a mental note of the lace-beribboned cap on Miss Pam's table; it was innocently disposed at just the angle of the pink bow which each had watched last evening, and doffed his hat to, as Peggy's own blessed and fortunate headgear!

"May we ask, how is —" the soldier-man ventured.

Then Miss Pam trembled in her slippers: then

the inhabitant of the clothes-press shivered. It took but four seconds to shiver and to tremble, and to think —

Would he say "Mrs. Gratiot"? Peggy dared to prompt her aunt from the closet, in a voice as low as a zephyr.

"How my niece is," interrupted Miss Burgoynes, obeying Peg's whisper, as she eyed the Captain as serenely and complacently as she could.

"Yes, Lady Peggy, she is well?" The soldier-man's intense gray eyes seemed to Miss Burgoynes to be looking through, not only her, but the walls and partitions separating him from her hidden ladyship.

Then Miss Pam took breath, and the one in the stuffy closet pinched herself for joy. He had not said "Mrs. Gratiot."

"My niece is very well, except for a fever that she has had, Captain, due to the journey she was compelled to take here on important business. It has completely ruined her beautiful hair." (Peggy had told her aunt to forever vow that she had had a fever.)

"A fever!" This chorus was as unanimous as even the Señor's; it spelled too, unmixed alarm, which was moreover written on each man's face.

"Yes, but nothing dangerous, not in the least, I assure you." Miss Pam almost smiled as she spoke.

"Her ladyship then is here?" It was Bandy

336 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

of course; dauntless, and actually peering into the apartment no one of them had been invited to enter.

Miss Burgoyne laughed as she moved aside, affording full view of the room. "She doesn't seem to be!" she exclaimed, while certainly the closet door did move: perhaps the mouse.

"Will she be here?" the soldier-man asked, directly. His nerves were at white heat.

"Ah, my niece is a very erratic young person, my dear Captain; no one can say where she will be, or what she will do. These gentlemen, who have known her for a long time, can bear out my assertions?" She glanced appealingly at the guardsmen.

"Indeed we can," they mournfully concerted, as all three thought.

"Then she is not here—and that shadow! That cap!"

Miss Pam moved never so slightly; her hand, the very hand they had all watched drawing in the jalousie the night before, was upon the knob; it rested there as lightly as thistle-down to be sure, and her smile was gracious and full of courtesy of course.

But the trio began their retreat: the Captain followed a quick fourth: the dismissal had been tacit but it was complete and uncompromising.

Each bowed; each wished Miss Pam a more peaceful day and a more enjoyable and pleasant

night than the previous one; and all silently descended the stairs.

Once at the bottom, however, they all distinctly heard the latch click open above.

It arrested their footsteps unconsciously.

They all heard Miss Pam's voice saying in a careless way, "Er — Captain Churchill!" quite as if she wanted, perhaps, to inquire the best means of reaching her next stopping-place, or some other trifling matter.

"Yes, Miss Burgoyne!" Jack was only at the last step down as he heard her call.

"Just a moment," the chaperone went on. "Would you mind riding to the station and fetching me the latest news about the north bound trains? I am so sorry to trouble you, but, I want to find out if it's possible for me to reach —"

"Certainly, Miss Burgoyne!" and the soldier-man was on top of his horse and off almost before Peggy's aunt could finish her sentence.

The three guardsmen went along the entry, out to the little round table on the grass-plot where they had been the night before.

They sat down, and as they exchanged very telling glances, gloom was written upon each brow.

"That closes our incident," remarked Mr. Hammond bitterly, as he glanced towards the upper room.

There were no lights up there.

Consequently there were no shadows.

"Is she there, do you think?" queried Bandy Bergh, in a forlorn fashion, as he adjusted his monocle.

"She's nowhere any more for us," was Sterling's melancholy reply.

"I don't believe she's up there at all," exclaimed Hammond stoutly.

"It doesn't make any difference, old man, where she is; she's nowhere for us, any more." Bandy struck a match quite savagely. "As old boy Sterling says, the game's up for her ladyship's guardsmen."

"Well, we didn't exactly expect she ever would be anywhere, especially, for us," Hammond ejaculated, as he too smoked slowly on.

"No," admitted Mr. Bergh, "but, still, we each of us just lived along, you know we did, Ham, brightened up by the knowledge that there wasn't anyone whom she did like particularly, either!"

"So far as we knew!" Sterling interpolated with startling and most pointed emphasis.

"Yes," from Bandy. "So far as we knew, and it appears we were not by way of knowing at all."

"We are not positive," Sterling asserted. "Girls are not candid," he added thoughtfully. "To be sure," was the addendum, "we wouldn't like them if they were!"

"Shall we get back to little old New York,"

Hammond half assented, half inquired of the other two, "or shall we wait and see?"

"We might as well start East," Bandy allowed with a very sage nod. "We'll fly it, too; the 'plane'll be fit in a day or two. I rather think we don't need to 'wait and see' anything much more instructive than we have seen."

There was a long pause; a pause and a silence of likely one-half hour, when Bandy took out his watch, then asked, "I say, Sterling, has he got back yet?"

Sterling nodded. "Ten minutes ago. He's up there. Didn't you see him come in the yard? Talking to Miss Burgoyne now in the entry."

"That tells the tale, doesn't it?" Hammond said this, and the other two inclined their heads.

Bandy said quietly, "No, I didn't see him. I didn't look up." But he looked up then and did see Churchill come down with time-table in his hand and a strange wonderful smile on his mouth.

The three guardsmen sat there in the garden of the Hotel Xochitl until morning dawned: the unparalleled reawakening of the world, of the tropics. Without a word. Not watching nor waiting; just fighting it out.

Before sun-up they had left the Hotel Xochitl behind them, not knowing, it is true, where her ladyship was, but knowing that Miss Burgoyne did know, and had of course told Captain Churchill; and surmising?

340 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

Many things.

That was enough.

Indeed it was all.

**Later on they made a record flight across the
continent.**

CHAPTER XXXIV

*In which, almost under the shadow of Bandy's biplane
Kent Gratiot and Jack Churchill meet face to face
once more*

WHEN the Captain came down the stairs with that wonderful smile on his lips, Miss Pam had just told him that he "should see Lady Peggy the following morning," and it was but to murder time until the next day should dawn.

The guardsmen killed the hours, as has been stated, sitting in silence on the veranda until the East flushed with the awakening visit of the sun.

The soldier-man could not sit there in silence, or any other place, except maybe in a saddle. He got a fresh mount from the Señor's stable, and little it mattered to him, as he rode out of the inn yard in the moonlight, that the beast he bestrode was deep crimson all in honor of the Saints, to be sure!

Churchill rode aimlessly, leisurely, his whole mentality bent upon her ladyship. How had she come to San Zucato? What had been her vicissitudes since the moment he had left her in the upper room at Walsh's shack, alone with Gratiot?

The crimson nag ambled on, and finally turned, of its own undisputed will, into a track through the cactus, a wild tangled place; yet the path had been lately trodden, for Jack idly noted, by the slant white beams of the moon, as she emerged now and then from a bank of silver-fringed clouds, that there were pony hoof-prints all along. His own beast seemed to be stepping exactly in these very imprints too; to be penetrating deep into the jungle. Well, what did it matter? The air was sweet, heavy with perfume; damp; cool and hot by turns. Sleepy birds, disturbed on their twigs, twittered as he passed by; lizards wakened and scampered in the fissures of the flat lichen-grown rocks; other living things of the night murmured and moved stealthily on earth and bough.

Then through the gloom, for the moon was hidden, came the neigh of a pony. By which token the soldier-man knew he was not alone in the dense thicket; and of course his hand went to his gun and slowly drew the iron out. The crimson beast responded cheerfully to the call of his kind.

Churchill heard across the blackness, as the branches struck him in the face, the breathing of both man and beast.

He reined in with a jerk to await the return of light.

Slowly, very slowly, for the wind was dallying that night, and almost asleep, the clouds floated

thinner and thinner, and at last altogether away from the face of the Lady of the Night.

Churchill, on the crimson, found himself within five feet of a man standing back toward him, bending a little over something that seemed to lie in front of him on the small space of free ground that there was. One hand held his pony's bridle, the other held a gun, of course.

The Captain held his nag steadily quiet.

He actually asked himself why he didn't turn off back to the highway, for he felt that he was an intruder.

That which lay upon the ground was a human being, a girl whose face also was averted from his view.

Something, however, held Jack Churchill right exactly there.

He did not speak or move.

He made no initiative.

He waited.

Presently the other man ejaculated impatiently.
“Well, go on, whoever you are. The path is clear.”

It was Kent Gratiot's voice.

Gratiot was off his mount.

Therefore Churchill slipped his stirrups and got to his feet.

“No need to dismount, stranger,” Gratiot said, without turning his head, “I'm stopping here because the lady with me has fainted.” He knelt

down beside the prostrate girl now, and made a show of rubbing a palm as he added, "her pony has wandered away." He whistled shrilly. "I'll soon get him along back. Pass on, I don't need any assistance, thank you."

Churchill had been tying the crimson horse to a stripling while Gratiot talked. This accomplished, he took a few steps forward that were necessary, and with his pistol in his right hand he laid his left lightly upon this man's shoulder.

As he did so he saw that the girl on the ground was one of those whom he had seen at Punty's a few nights before.

Gratiot sprang up straight. His gun, it is recalled, was already in his grasp.

"Don't you lay a finger on me, Churchill!" In response to which the soldier-man's left hand impressed itself more firmly on Gratiot's shoulder and he held his iron close to Gratiot's temple.

"So you've got me, eh? at last?" Kent said, apparently abandoning himself to fate.

Only that was not Kent Gratiot's way.

The faint relax which his words had occasioned in Churchill's eyes and grip were the loophole the spy had planned for.

Through it, with the agility of one accustomed to taking the nineteenth part of the chance, Gratiot sprang, and his big hands, the iron in one of them still, gripped the soldier-man by the throat.

He held him too, long enough to spurt out the words that were burning up in his heart.

" You think you've got Peg away from me, don't you? But you haven't. I'll leave your flesh rotting here. Here in this hole and get back to her, and have her and hold her, and make her mine. Do you hear that? I'll break into her room, I know where she is now and I'll have a priest and she daren't say no. And —"

Churchill had been worsted. In the few seconds that were occupied by the spy's speech, the soldier-man knew very well that he was somewhat at the mercy of the man he had been hunting for years.

Not altogether though.

The soldier-man had not lived in brown Japan, for nothing.

He kept still, he even yielded seemingly to Kent Gratiot's grasp. Gratiot had his iron now pressed up to Jack's left side when —

With one of the marvelous little tender muscle motions of the jiu-jitsu, the soldier-man gained the upper hand.

He held Gratiot as in a vise, bound and unable to stir beneath him.

" Now," Churchill said, " what about this girl here on the ground? Be quick because I am going to take you back to San Zucato with me."

" Are you? " The spy spoke sullenly, essay-

ing to pry himself free of the other's knees and weight.

"Who is the girl?"

"What in hell is that to you?" he whispered.

"Who is the girl, and what is the matter with her?" Churchill persisted.

"She's dead," came the answer quickly.

'And in the presence of death, the soldier-man was speechless for a moment. He took Gratiot's gun up and thus with a pistol in each hand he said, covering him closely, "Get up and come on. We'll walk back to San Zucato. Go ahead."

Gratiot rose slowly and obeyed; he almost halted just one second and stared at the dead girl.

"Did you kill her?" asked the soldier-man.

"I suppose so," Gratiot smiled to himself, and then went on ahead of his captor through the jungle, feeling his way stolidly.

Neither of them spoke any more.

When they reached the open, Churchill said curtly, "To the left;" and Gratiot immediately turned.

They trudged on for a couple of miles. The moon was riding low and the cloud-banks were skimming high. It came dark by the time they had reached the next turn.

"To the left again," the Captain sang out.

And Kent turned obediently for the second time. The clouds skimmed lighter yet and just

then the rim of the setting moon blazed their path fully.

With a movement like the flash in the heavens, Gratiot drew a gun from his inner pocket and the muzzle pointed to Churchill.

But Churchill's two weapons were just as quickly up and in commission.

" You can't down me, Churchill. By —— you shall never have Lady Peggy de Bohun!" He fired. But the Captain's right hand weapon knocked the spy's gun aside: his iron turned on himself. Through the balmy beauty of the tropical night, the spy was journeying off into the vast immeasurable Somewhere, whither Florida had preceded him.

CHAPTER XXXV.

In which the kiss her lover gave her ladyship, her ladyship never forgot

To go back a little while in the day.

Mexico, having no less than one hundred and thirty-one holidays in each year, the population is naturally rather hard worked in the fiesta line.

The day after the Day of Blessing of the Animals had happened, fortunately enough for Miss Pam and her niece, to be the fiesta of San Bolixto, a gentleman and martyr deeply revered and accordingly celebrated by the denizens of the next nearest village, which was some ten miles only away from San Zucato.

It was asked of Miss Pam by the host, "Would the Señora be much in the offense if once more again, Abixtido and his family, also the staff entire, inclusive of the children-minus-clothes, of the Hotel Xochitl, should go forth to the honor of San Bolixto ? "

No, Miss Pam would not be in the offense at all. She would speed these worthy people all of them, and did so on their early way, as each mounted upon one or other of the still gorgeously

decorated and unusually colored burros, ponies and horses.

It is esteemed over yonder a most felicitous fact that the Animal fiesta happens just the day before the day of San Bolixto, thus adding, not only to the honor of the latter saint, but to the general gayety of all villages in the vicinity, which means with Mexico a radius of some thirty or forty miles at the least computation.

In any event, the particular cavalcade from the Hotel Xochitl set forth, not an hour after the departure of the guardsmen: and it is to be recorded that the cavalier of the real silver tassels on his sombrero, was not among the missing.

Lady Peggy and her aunt had reviewed both departures; that of the trio, as well as that of the Abixtido contingent, from the window of the upper room; Lady Peggy discreetly shrouded in the curtains, it is sure.

Presently the inn yard was deserted.

Only a few blue hens, one yellow goose, and some green turkeys, wandered about over the turf, while the azure lamb of Señorita Dolores tied to a fuchsia bush, baaed lustily to the fragrant and unresponsive air.

Once the last human being had disappeared, her ladyship emerged from her curtains; she breathed freely; and she then stood straight, in her woman's clothes at last; a little sorrowful over the strangeness and unaccustomedness of

her short locks, trembling at heart as she looked at her aunt.

"Peg, he is waiting," Miss Pam exclaimed eagerly. "You know I told him yesterday that he should see you face to face this morning."

"Yes, I know." Her ladyship's tone was almost dejected.

"Shall I say he may come up?" the chaperone inquired hopefully.

"Not yet." Peg sat down before the tiny mirror.

"The room, I am sure, is quite appropriate, since it looks like a salon, as Señor Abixtido calls it." Miss Burgoyne was fussily arranging and re-arranging the furniture.

"Does it?" her ladyship asked.

"Yes. That divan in the daytime has all the appearance of a sofa, and the cushion covers of drawn-work done by the young ladies are simply really exquisite." Miss Burgoyne smoothed them all over the divan for the eleventh time only.

"Are they?" Peggy articulated dispiritedly.

Miss Burgoyne surveyed her niece in positive alarm. "Peggy! are you asleep! Wake up. The Captain is waiting."

"I know it, Aunt Pam"; her ladyship rose from the mirror and went into the closet.

"Peggy! What in the world are you doing?" the chaperone cried in amazed inquiry, as she be-

held her niece slipping out of a frilled and fur-belowed gown, with laces and ribbons galore, and getting into a little brown frock with a Dutch neck and short sleeves; saw Peg putting a brown ribbon around her curly head; saw her laying off all her rings, and then coming out again and surveying herself in the mirror once more.

"Peggy, why are you putting on that absurd thing that you wore when you called yourself 'Mrs. Gratiot,' instead of this lovely Paris frock?" Miss Burgoyne's tone was aggrieved, not to say exasperated, as she hung up the discarded finery.

"Because," answered Lady Peggy, "the pink donkey that the fat lady rode out of the garden just now couldn't have felt any worse or more patently dressed for the occasion, in his paint, than I in that Paris frock." Then Peggy added, "Captain Churchill saw me first in this brown gown."

"Oh!" It was very singular but Miss Pam instantly tried to recall what gown the Colonel had first seen her in! Such are the imitative and sympathetic faculties of the adorable and desirable sex.

"Peggy, dear," Miss Pam could not forbear a little superintending. "You are sadly tanned. Just a tint of this rose-colored powder?" She was advancing with the puff upraised, and her ladyship submitted with the smallest kind of a sigh

of ruefulness, as she noted the dark and weather-beaten color of her skin.

"And, my dear, I would certainly," added Miss Pam encouragingly, "if I were you, try to tie in this switch of your own hair; I'll help you, and with a comb or two, and your broad ribbon band it will pass muster perfectly well. Men never know much about such things anyway, dear."

"Just as you say, Aunt Pam." Her ladyship surrendered with discretion; she beheld with contrition and disgust that her hair was the missing aureole of her face and, fluff the short locks as she had tried to, that bewitching countenance of hers, without the whole of its accustomed setting, did seem lacking.

The switch, not being as yet woven, proved somewhat unruly, but it was at last adjusted by Miss Pam in a braid like a crown on top of her ladyship's lovely head.

"Does it look nice, Auntie?" she inquired meekly.

"Just look at it, dear!" Miss Pam held up the hand-mirror admiringly.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Peggy, "but I am a fright! A positive, unmitigated fright! I had not thought to look like this even at ninety-five!"

"Nonsense; he will not think so." Miss Pam spoke with confidence.

"How does he look, Aunt Pam?" Peg asked

after a pause, which she employed in twitching the braid around in different fashions.

"He looks thin and haggard," was the chaperone's reply.

"What did he say; tell me again, when you told him I was here when he brought you the time-tables?" Her ladyship had laid down both hand-mirror, comb and brush; the braid was having its own way on top of her head.

"He didn't say a word at first; but there was such a great joy in his eyes, dear, and his hands shook. Then he asked, 'when can I see her?'"

"Yes. Was he pale?" Her ladyship's two round white elbows rested on the dressing-table top, her chin was in her palms; she was once more staring at her own reflection.

"No, not pale, tanned, just as you are; but very white around the lips."

"Yes. And then?" her ladyship sighed profoundly.

"Then when I said, 'to-morrow after they are all gone away,' he sighed, and without a syllable, went out of the house. I saw him get on a horse, and he never came back until just a few minutes ago, Peggy."

"Where is he now?" she asked, still gazing into her own most eloquent, most lovely eyes.

"He is walking up and down the entry: don't you hear him?"

Her ladyship seemed to listen intently.

"I suppose I do." She leaned back in the wicker chair, and her lids fell.

"Well!" Miss Pam was at the door, her hand was on the knob. Her niece sprang to her feet.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "When you've worn a false name; two, three! of them, Auntie! When you've been a Mrs., when you weren't married at all! When you've been a Barkeep boy, and a Billy Birdsong cutthroat; when you've cut off your hair, and worn a dead man's clothes and shoes, and been half starved, and ridden astride, which I despise. When you've stolen horses, and been hunted; and when you've shot the Tucson Terror; when you've flouted the reverend clergy; when you've been very, very dirty; and tried to mix drinks for gamblers and highwaymen; and failed, utterly at cooking coffee even. You haven't much respect left for yourself!" And her ladyship sat down on the deceitful divan and groaned aloud as she added, "when you've confessed the most of it to a Colonel in the army too, and begged his horse and ridden it from the Fort here; when you've hidden in thickets and been shot at and all for the sake of — him! how can you look him in the face?"

"Peggy de Bohun!" Miss Burgoyne started away from the door-knob in horror and blank amazement. "Have you done all of that?"

Miss Pam too sat down, beside her niece on the divan that was really a bed.

Lady Peggy nodded slowly but with decision, and no appeal.

"Yes, I have, Aunt Pam, and even more."

Miss Pam sank back amid the much admired drawn-work cushions on the deceitful divan. She was speechless, in fact she was unable to think even.

"I couldn't tell you everything before, Aunt Pam. I hadn't the nerve, until I'd had two meals." Her ladyship did smile very bravely. "Now you know it all. I don't think there's much more." Peggy spoke carefully as if weighing the past few days with due and absolute regard for truth.

"The heavens be praised! I hope not," feebly came from Miss Burgoyne's lips.

"But, Aunt Pam," her ladyship sprang up and darted across by her chaperone, knelt down, and whispered with shamed face, "he's worth it all."

"Is he, dear?" Miss Burgoyne was recuperating, a process aided by fond visions of what the Colonel of the 42nd might be under similar conditions. Any woman's sympathy with her sex is nowhere so conspicuous as in cases where each has a love affair on her hands. Suffrage is a cipher in comparison of this test.

"Aunt Pam," Peg had risen and was now using

the pink-tinted powder puff herself, very vigorously, "will you please tell him he may come up."

Miss Pam went down, joy beaming in her kindly eyes. And he came up.

But, it was a white-faced, cropped-headed girl whom he held in his arms; and there was a ten-dollar bill in her small fist, and maybe there were salt drops in the corners of her blue eyes, maybe there were not.

Her handkerchief, tinted pink, from sound rubbing of her ladyship's face, lay in a ball on the deceitful divan; her shorn tresses spreading wide, she had flung upon the matted floor; her beautiful fringed lids were down; then she felt his heart next her own; then he felt her heart throbbing close to his; and yet she laughed as she looked at the pink handkerchief and the switch of long brown hair.

For a good bit of a while there was not a word said.

When there was, it was Churchill who broke the exquisite silence. "Peggy, you have been ill, more ill than your aunt will admit. Tell me about it?"

"I have not been ill," Peg said, but as her eyes were on the long tresses on the table she could not help her smiles.

"But Miss Pam said 'a fever,' and fevers are dangerous. Your hair, your beautiful dark hair, had to be cut off, Peg. Tell me?"

"There it all is!" Her ladyship indicated the shorn tresses.

"I see." Jack reached for it, took it and smoothed the silky lengths.

"Who cut it off, Peg, for you?"

"I did."

"You yourself! Dear, have you been here ever since, I left you — at — Walsh's! How did you get away? Who helped you? Peg, Peg, tell me all!" He gathered her to him.

"I got away out the upper window, by the porch roof, down the post and so, on."

"Gratiot came back then?" the soldier-man asked in a low tone.

Lady Peggy shook her head. "No, I've never seen him since."

"From whom were you escaping then?" The Captain's mind was conjuring up visions of unspeakable terror.

"From Billy Birdsong," her ladyship replied with a sigh!

"Birdsong!" echoed Jack. "Were you! — Peg!" He seized her delicious face between his palms and held it up for as intent a gaze as man's eyes could give. "Were you in Walsh's shack hiding somewhere, somehow, when Birdsong was there with his gang?"

Lady Peg nodded.

"And the young Barkeep, with the dirty face, and the very disheveled shirt and jacket,"

358 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

Churchill exclaimed truthfully, "helped you out?"

"He did," her ladyship admitted.

"I knew it! I knew that Barkeep knew all about you, and had you secreted somewhere. Where was it, Peg, my dearest dear? Ah, to think you were in that shack and I couldn't find you! Where were you?"

"Close beside the Barkeep all the time."

"No, sweetheart, not all the time. You think you were, of course; but listen to me. While you were safe somewhere, that slim Barkeep saved my life. He shot Birdsong; you heard that shot, didn't you?"

"Yes," allowed her ladyship. "I did hear that shot."

"We must do large things for the Barkeep boy, Peg. I've been trying to find him ever since. I was sure he was here night before last. I was positive I saw him in the thicket."

"Yes," admitted Lady Peg. "He was here."

"You saw him?" The Captain's tone was one of amazed joyfulness.

Peggy shook her head. "I never had a look at him Captain Churchill. Auntie saw him."

"He isn't here now?" Jack asked eagerly.

"Yes," her ladyship said. "He is."

"Where? Down in the Señor's quarter, I suppose."

"No," her ladyship said, rising from the de-

ceitful divan. "I think he's nearer by." She went into the closet; Jack followed her to the door. She came out laden with the jacket, trousers, cap, woolen stockings and enormous shoes which had done noble duty for the Barkeep boy.

"Here are his clothes, Jack," she spoke her lover's name for the first time in her life, very softly, very gently, as she spread before his astounded eyes the garments of the slim lad. On top of them she laid her own long cut-off locks; beside these, two crumpled ten dollar bills, and last, she took from the bureau drawer the pistol Jack had left on the table in the upper room at Walsh's.

"Peg!" Churchill stared at her; his breath came in big throbs of impassioned delight, pride, over-joy, heavenly happiness.

"Peggy, my girl, was it — it wasn't you?"

"It was I."

"Dear heart of me." He held her and all the Barkeep's belongings too very close in his arms.

"There's more, Jack."

"Tell me?"

"I stole a horse from Bandy Bergh, and was mistaken for Birdsong, and carried off and up in the air — it almost killed me — because I wouldn't tell them where Lady Peggy was, and I had to bluff it so as to reach the Colonel in time,

and save you." Her glorious little head was down on his shoulder.

Churchill bent his face over hers.

"Peg, why did you do, and risk, and endure all this? So much, so all too much, my dearest dear?"

"For you," she whispered.

"Why?" he whispered too and his voice was worshipful.

"Because — I love you and because you would have died for me."

There was not a sound to be heard except the little birds singing to one another in the boughs.

By and by Churchill said, "I would."

Then he quitted her ladyship, and went away, presently returning with a parcel in his hands and laughter shining in his eyes.

He untied the sleeves that bound it and showed her her jacket and skirt and slippers, and various beautiful and bewildering lace and beribboned things, the names of which he was not too clear about.

"Where did you find them, Jack?"

"In the ice-box."

Then it was to laugh.

Then it was Youth and Love and Mirth and the little piece of heaven every man and girl gets a glimpse of in the hour that is like this hour of Peg's and Jack's.

Presently the Captain asked:

"But when, Peggy, my own?"

"When what?" she returned, with a sigh of amazing restfulness.

"Will you marry me?" he added in a matter-of-course fashion.

"Next spring," she said doubtfully; "maybe next spring; maybe not until next autumn."

"It will be next month," the soldier-man said with prompt decision.

"No, impossible. I couldn't. No."

"Yes," Churchill said. And then the kiss he gave her, her ladyship never forgot.

And when much later on, Señor Abixtido and his interesting family returned home plus the cavalier of the felt sombrero with the real silver tassels, it was a source of much delight to them to learn that the honorable young lady from Estados Unidos had arrived during their absence, and that they would have the pleasure of serving her, yes, and also the splendid gentleman of the army of Estados Unidos for a time to come.

How and by what conveyance the young lady had arrived, the Abixtidos were luckily too naturally preoccupied with the affair of Señorita Dolores and her cavalier to pause to inquire.

CHAPTER XXXVI

In which the guardsmen pledge, "Here's to her ladyship"—and, "Here's to him"

It was New Year's Eve; so much for the time of year.

It was New York; so much for the town.

And it was the Ritz-Carlton; so much for the place.

The three guardsmen sat, together of course, around their own special table; the little table that was quite celebrated in its way as the one at which, when the trio had it, no woman ever yet had been seen.

Bandy and Hammond and Sterling had devoted themselves thenceforth, on their return from the Far West to no girl or girls.

It had been Lady Peggy with these three men from the start, as soon as she had come to the States after her father's death; choosing her mother's native land as she did for her place of residence. When she had left town, they had left it too.

When they came back to town, well, to be sure, her ladyship had not returned. No one in New York knew any more of her whereabouts than they

had the day she had disappeared. None of the triumvirate ever, then or later on, rehearsed their experiences or adventures; although in the den of one or the other, they often called it all up between them; that was their pleasure.

That New Year's eve they looked about the brilliant room with eyes that perhaps were a little interested through all their apparent carelessness.

"We'll always be looking for her to turn up, won't we, old men?" Bandy ejaculated over his terrapin.

Hammond nodded slowly and sat back a bit, listening to the music.

Sterling said: "Always. I say, boys, what a lot of frumps these other women are," he cast a scornful glance at some of the handsomest, best-gowned and groomed women of the day. Buds, blossoms, full-growns; radiant, merry, *en grande tenue*, faultless, with their men in happy, devoted, proud attendance.

"No, they're not, now, Sterling; they're a fine lot, old boy, fine; it's only because we're used to measuring the whole sex up by her ladyship, that we find the rest of the crowd so —"

"Enervating," concluded Hammond lazily, breaking off a gardenia from the cluster in the vase.

"Precisely, that's it; you hit the bull's-eye, Ham," Bandy said. "I suppose," he added reflectively, "all women are enervating to all men

when the men are locked up for life and forever,
to the Girl of Girls as we are."

Both the others nodded. "I wonder where
she is to-night!" Sterling sighed guardedly.

"We've been repeating that wonder every
night since we left San Zucato, haven't we?"
Hammond asked with a smile.

"I reckon we have, but this evening seems to
accentuate it, somehow; doesn't it, now?" Bandy
inquired.

"Surely! Because each of us three is remem-
bering last New Year's Eve at the Plaza." Bandy
drained his glass at this reply of Sterling's.

"Yes," Hammond admitted, "that's it. That
night her ladyship put us all, if I make it cor-
rectly, rather in a good humor. I had a scarf
to hold; you had her gloves; and Sterling was per-
mitted to take care of the bracelet that got broken;
remember?"

Both the others remembered only too well,
they said.

"I think each of us thought that night that
he had a fighting chance." Mr. Hammond was
taking his terrapin now.

Two more nods, twin-like in their gloomy rem-
iniscence, responded to this remark.

"It was a way she had," Hammond exclaimed.

"It certainly was." Then came resignation of
spoons and forks all around, and the three leaned
back to discuss it as eagerly as they had at first.

"I say! I wonder if she ever got the jewelry we sent on?"

"Yes; didn't I tell you? Of course I did. To be sure. We held it long enough to be called thieves," Sterling replied to Hammond. "But I sent it at last."

"The reason we held it was we were hoping she'd come back, and that we could hand it to her, ourselves," Mr. Bergh explained to them, just as he always did when they got on that subject.

"To be sure. I know. Well, I've got the receipt from Miss Burgoyne," Sterling added. "It came only this very morning too!"

"Where from?" Hammond and Bergh asked in one breath.

"Oh, she said in her note, that it had been forwarded to her in Washington; and that she would send it on to her niece."

"Still secluded, eh?" Hammond inquired, breaking the gardenia all to bits.

"With him," the words were heavily emphasized, "in attendance," Sterling stated.

"Do you think she'll marry him, boys?" Bandy questioned, as he resumed his fork with a sigh. Bandy was hungry, he was unusually hungry; they had come in very late; and it wanted the half hour only of twelve now.

"Do I think there's wine in this glass?" growled Mr. Hammond, holding up a full one.

366 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

"As bad as that, do you think so, really, down deep?" Bandy pursued, cutting up his quail.

"Of course I do. Don't you?" Hammond asked savagely.

"I fancied her ladyship might, you know, change her mind, Ham, and—" Mr. Bergh was struggling with his game.

"She'll no more change her mind than Birdsong changed his!" Mr. Hammond was actually morose and flecked the remains of the gardenia to the floor.

"She always has," Bandy murmured; "always has changed her mind."

"Quit it, Bandy," Hammond remarked and for a few minutes there was silence.

"When I think of that Birdsong!" exclaimed Sterling, breaking up the pause, "what a slim chap he was; he didn't look more than twenty odd, did he now?"

Sterling seemed to be balancing up the Tucson Terror in his mind's eye as he spoke.

"He probably wasn't!" Hammond said.

"Do you know, I met a man from Colorado who'd known Birdsong all his life; and he says the Tucson Terror is forty-nine and weighs one hundred and seventy-five pounds." Bandy sprung it as a joke. "I had to smile," Mr. Bergh proceeded, "as I recalled the ride in the air I had treated Mr. Birdsong to, but I said nothing, of course."

"Of course not. Much your Colorado friend knows of the real thing. Birdsong! Forty-nine years and one hundred and seventy-five pounds! If he had been, he would never have got away so neatly with my Star Black, or from us, that night at the Hotel Xochitl at San Zucato." Mr. Hammond laughed. "Do you remember, boys?"

"Certainly; but that spy yarn was queer?" Bandy's tone was, as usual, marked by his inquiring turn of mind, and it came after some reflection.

"It looked rather windy, certainly;" was the retort. "But Thorsby told me something in confidence."

"What," Bandy, just as if a bomb had burst in his face, laid down everything to interrupt Hammond, "did Thorsby tell you?"

"I said confidence, old man," was succinctly repeated, as Mr. Hammond placed an irate eye upon his comrade.

"Oh! Beg pardon. I say, though, where did you knock up against Thorsby, Ham?" Bandy was still inquiring; probably would be up to his demise.

"I met him right here. A furlough; a wedding journey: and a nice little freckle-faced girl; sweet and sound as a June apple or peach, or any other fruit of the sun and the wind."

"Good." Bandy's mind, however, was on

Mr. Thorsby's confidences more than on Mr. Thorsby's bridal acquisition.

They then for a space ate in silence. The mirth and the flutter and gayety; the laughter and the lilt of the dying year; the music, the voices, the tinkle; these were all going on around them. There was not a single table without its women: only theirs; and one to be sure as yet quite unoccupied. They were proud of it!

Reverently, as the minute hands all over the great town Lady Peggy had left, swung on to twelve o'clock; as the lights in the big room lowered, then lessened, down to mere points of brilliance, then went out; as the pageant could be heard foot-falling along the corridors, the three guardsmen raised their glasses, ready on the stroke to pledge her.

And when the bells rang up and down the city, when the great White Way was one vast peal of laughter and mirth, when the music burst out anew and when the perfumed confetti were flung, and when a thousand other merry things happened in the splendid restaurant, the trio stood up and together drank her ladyship's health.

As Bandy raised his glass, Hammond was counting the strokes of the old year; and Sterling stealthily sighed; they could discern two figures floating past them; even the trail of the woman's cloak swished over Bandy's shoe.

"Here's to her ladyship." They could say it

quite aloud now, for after the intense quiet of listening to the twelve strokes was over, the riot of sound broke loose with greater fervor than before.

The old, old year was dead and was buried.
But long live the New, New Year!

“Here’s to her ladyship!”

“Here’s to her ladyship!”

Up flashed the electrics to their fullest flare; there was a blaze, a splendor of wonderful rose-color, changing to violet, then to blue; by and by to green; then to white; and yellow; and back to rose color.

And when they looked around they saw that the empty table near them was filled.

There sat her ladyship in the most wonderful white frock with little pink roses skipping about all over it, and with diamond dew-drops sparkling in the heart of every little rose; with chains of diamonds on her neck and arms, and with a small diadem resting on the top of her short curly hair.

(She had had a fever they remembered, and in fevers the hair was always cut off.)

Captain Churchill was the man who was with her.

Presently others, and many men who had been her ladyship’s slaves, began to gather around her.

The three guardsmen held back; her ladyship’s

372 MY LADY PEGGY LEAVES TOWN

it's this way; I want my friends to know and be
friends with, my husband, Captain Churchill."

And this was THE END or the beginning —
which?

PROPERTY
OF THE
NEW-YORK
SOCIETY LIBRARY



